

# WOMEN AS SEEN BY WOMEN : A STUDY OF AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

*A Thesis submitted  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY*

*By*  
NAVNEET SETHI

*to the*  
DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, KANPUR  
*March, 1996*

*Dedicated to*  
*Ma - Dad*  
*Maninder - Tamara*  
*Sarmeen - Gurmeet*

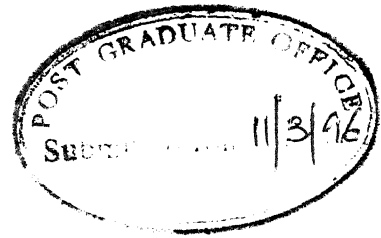


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*N. Belliappa Meena*

DR. N. BELLIAPPA MEENA

Department of Humanities & Social Sciences  
I.I.T. Kanpur

March 1996

## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that Ms. **Navneet Sethi** has satisfactorily completed all the course requirements for the Ph.D. Programme in English. The courses include :

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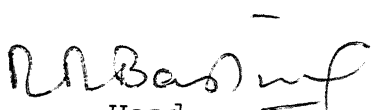
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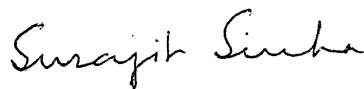
Eng 713 Themes and Values in Modern Literature

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Ms. Navneet Sethi was admitted to the candidacy of the Ph.D. degree in November 1991 after she successfully completed the written and the oral qualifying examination.



Head  
Department of Humanities  
and Social Sciences  
I.I.T. Kanpur



Convener  
Departmental  
Post-Graduate Committee  
I.I.T. Kanpur

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to my thesis supervisor, Dr. N. B. Meena, for her unfailing guidance and support through all the stages of this research project. Her deep sense of commitment to literature is invigorating and, indeed, has been an important source of motivation for me too. I thank Dr. Meena for encouraging me to develop insights that can understand the importance of a broader perspective - in life and in art. The effort made in this study to understand the complexities of Afro-American experience has also helped me to steer clear of duplicity in perceptions about my own experience as a physically disabled person. I have, therefore, been personally and academically enriched by my association with Dr. Meena.

I am very grateful to the faculty members of the English group in particular, and other faculty members in general. It was during my course work with Dr. R. K. Gupta and Dr. S. K. Aithal that I developed interest in "ethnic literatures". I am also thankful to Dr. B. N. Patnaik, Dr. P.P. Sah and Dr. Achala Raina for always encouraging me. I am in no small measure indebted to Dr. R. R. Barthwal, who in his capacity as the Head of the Department, has been a source of constant support to me.

There are many people whose generous assistance and concern has helped me in completion of my research work. I am personally grateful to all the members of the H.S.S. Department's office. Their constant support and helpful gestures are greatly appreciated. I extend my sincere thanks to every member of the Central Library, I.I.T. Kanpur. In their own individual capacity,

each member has provided me with timely help. I am especially grateful to Shri Shesh Narain Shukla of Central Library for his unceasing cooperation. Words are inadequate, and perhaps trivial, for expressing my deep sense of gratitude for Shri Hemant Kumar and Shri Gopi Singh of P. R. Office. They have taught me a very important lesson, that when we do something for another we do not have to wait to get our efforts appreciated. Thank you both.

I am grateful to Shri Yash Pal Gupta who has typed this thesis. I appreciate his patience in typing my manuscripts. He has been very cooperative.

I am what I am today because of a wonderful family and an immensely close knit circle of friends. Each one in his and her own special way has helped me to develop a holistic and mature perspective towards life. Special thanks also for my crisis manager, Richa Verma, and Sujata Chaturvedi, my conscience keeper.

For being there to chase away what I fear most, " ", I am grateful to my friends in the Girls Hostel - Anita, Bedamati Das, Sabita, Anjali, Manju and Sarabjit Kaur. I am thankful to Bedamati Das for giving me a special place in her heart. Her genuineness makes it the most beautiful place to be in.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I am grateful to all Afro-American writers who with their works of fiction have enriched my understanding not only of Afro-American experience, but the entire human condition.

## SYNOPSIS

The study analyses the portrayal of women by Afro-American women writers from a universalist perspective. The study shows that the complex nature of an Afro-American woman's experience is highlighted satisfactorily through a universalist approach. The rhetoric of opposition which characterises gender and race based approaches is not adequate for grasping the complexity inlaid into an Afro-American woman's experience.

This study points out that the nature of an experience cannot be fully understood by defining it in terms of race, gender, class or colour. The amorphous nature of Afro-American women's experience, this study shows, is actually more amenable to the openendedness of the universalist approach. The approach illustrates the varied nature of response to experience in individual writers. The presence of more than one response itself illustrates the pluralistic nature of Afro-American women's experience.

A comparative analysis is made in this study on the portrayal of women by two contemporary Afro-American women writers, *Alice Walker* and *Toni Morrison*. The parallels and contrasts in their individual visions of Afro-American experience emphasise the possibility of multiple responses by Afro-American women writers. *Alice Walker's* 'womanist' orientations are reflected in her rendering of black woman's condition as one of victimisation at the hands of black males and whites in society. *Toni Morrison*, in contrast, does not see experience of an Afro-American woman as a conflict against males or whites. Women, in Morrison's fiction are not portrayed only as victims. Her portrayal, instead, tries

to grasp and recreate the ambivalence within a black woman's experience. Therefore, Morrison's portrayal of black women shows the inadequacy of seeing the experience within a rhetoric of victimisation.

The study shows that the choice of these two writers gains relevance when the universalist perspective is engaged to analyse the representation of Afro-American women's experience by their predecessors. Reference to works of predecessors is made in the chapters as and when required, to gain understanding of the nature of their individual responses as well on experiential concerns similar to those explored by Walker and Morrison in their novels. These comparative references show that, in Walker and Morrison, the Afro-American women's literary tradition has reached a significant point of maturity. *Alice Walker* and *Toni Morrison* recreate in their works the experiential crisis in individuals grappling with the specific reality of being a black female in American society. Both writers try to create fictional equivalents which most convincingly articulate the nature of their individual responses to Afro-American women's experience. The study emphasises that a close reading of their works can reveal the significant parallels and contrasts in Walker's and Morrison's visions of Afro-American women's experience.

The significance of the universalist perspective in actually recognising the complex humanity of Afro-American women's experience is explained in *Chapter I*. The importance of the approach is evident when seen in relation to the critical limitations of feminist and race-oriented ideological approaches to representation of Afro-American women in fiction. A survey of



existing critical trends explains the reason for dissatisfaction with these perspectives and points out the relevance of critical perceptions which are universalist and resist labelling experience within fixed categories. The aim, scope and contents of the various chapters in the thesis are outlined in the introductory chapter.

Chapter II entitled *Black Women as Victims : Exploring the Nature of Violence* analyses the theme of black women as victims of violence in Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Walker sees black women as victims of violence - psychological as well as physical - inflicted by black men. Women, it is stressed in Walker's novel, can attain their rightful human status, only when black men recognise the nature and extent of their culpability in acts of violence committed against black women. Walker's novel shows that women are primarily the victims of sexism rather than victims of racism. The narrative strategy engaged by Walker builds up her 'womanist' concerns. Making the change in a black male as an effective instrument for change in the life of a black woman is a well-conceived technique for highlighting Walker's 'womanist' vision of experience. In contrast, Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* employs narrative strategies which emphasise the presence of violence in the lives of black men as well. Victimization is a reality faced not only by black women but black men too. In fact, Morrison's novel shows the brutalising impact of violence in the lives of black men as well, hitherto perceived as irredeemable oppressors. Unlike Walker's views on victimisation, Morrison's stress is also on showing that the

victim by being the kind of person he/she is makes oppression possible. Therefore, Morrison does not see the state of victimisation as a violation coming only from without. In contrast to Walker, Morrison emphasises the individual nature of response, and, the individual can be black or white, male or female.

Chapter III entitled *The Outcast in the Community : A Different Kind of Presence* compares Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982) and Morrison's novel *Sula* (1974) analysing their views on black woman's experience as an outcast in her community. It is pointed out how the theme of being an outcast, a pariah, also figured significantly in the novels by predecessors of Walker and Morrison. Novels like *Iola Leroy* or *Shadows Uplifted* (1892) by Francis E. W. Harper; *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) by Nella Larsen and *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston present responses by early Afro-American women writers to the woman's situation as an outcast in her community.

Like the predecessors, Walker also sees the outcast's presence as a positive point of reference in order to show women's oppression within the black community. The use of the epistolary form in *The Color Purple* provides credibility to the intensely subjective nature of the protagonist's responses to her experience. Through friendships between the female rebel outcast and the female victim, Walker shows the relevance of a female outcast figure. The outcast is shown to initiate the process of questioning and the journey of self-realisation in the female victim, and also in black men who are conventionally seen as oppressors. Walker emphasises the possibility of change in black

males due to the redemptive influence of a female outcast figure.

In contrast, Morrison's novel *Sula* sees the presence of an ambivalence even within the positive experiential dimensions of a female outcast figure. Morrison's use of the female friendship motif desists from glorifying the condition of being an outcast against the socially acceptable condition of being a conformist. The novel shows that the tendency to do wrong and the effort of trying to be good exist and function simultaneously in an individual. It is possible, the novel *Sula* shows, that the insider who is seen as an innocent victim is not so innocent. The novel shows that it is possible for the innocent victim also to commit a wrong like the rebel who openly flouts the norms of society. This view builds up the ambivalent nature of experience itself which reveals that both labels - outcast and victim - are finally only constructs and therefore are inadequate to a complete understanding of the human experience.

Chapter IV entitled *Images of Wives : The (Un)Settled Marriage* explores the portrayal of black women as wives in *The Temple of My Familiar*, a novel by Alice Walker (1989) and in *Jazz* (1992), a novel by Toni Morrison.

The earlier writers were also, like Walker and Morrison, keenly interested in exploring different facets of matrimony. A black woman's quest for selfhood in context of matrimony is explored in *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston's novel is path breaking as it takes a very common experiential situation and creates out of it a metaphor, relevant not only for exploring the nature of an Afro-American woman's matrimonial experience, but the experience of any one/

engaged in a quest for selfhood amidst opposing social structures.

In her novel *Jazz* (1992) Morrison, like Hurston, explores the nature of ambivalence in a matrimonial relationship. Morrison does not see matrimony as a condition of oppressiveness for women. Instead, Morrison emphasises that falsity in marriages can be created both by women and men. The novel stresses the unique nature of an individual's response to the crises in marriage that cannot be simplified in terms of the rhetoric of gender oppression.

Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* uses the narrative module of memories as life histories to reinforce her perception that black women were and still are oppressed within the institution of marriage. Walker's portrayal of women as wives, in contrast to Morrison's portrayal sees the necessity of change in black males' approach to the experience of matrimony, if women have to move beyond the state of victimisation.

Chapter V entitled *Woman as Nurturer : Changing Perceptions of Motherhood* compares the portrayal of black women as mothers in *Beloved* (1988), a novel by Morrison and *Meridian* (1976), a novel by Walker.

Earlier works like *The Street* (1946) by Ann Petry and *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* (1954) by Paule Marshall also recreate perceptions of motherhood, and in the effort to understand the complex nature of experience, these writers try to alter existing perceptions on motherhood. Even when *The Street* idealizes the black mother it does not portray males and whites singularly as oppressors. Marshall's novel *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* shows a complex portrait of the black woman as a mother also showing very

naturally her frailty, which actually authenticates her humanity.

*Beloved* and *Meridian* are also concerned to show the individual complexity of a black woman's experience of motherhood. Both, Walker and Morrison, see nurturing as an instinct that grows out of a state of mind which is not ensured only by being a mother in the biological sense. In both the novels mothers commit acts which violate the black community's cherished ideals of motherhood. Still, the novelists, in showing what motivates their acts prove the inadequacy of existing notions. The novels show the actual humanity of those seen as inhuman for their violation of the idealised image of motherhood.

Walker's novel *Meridian* elevates the black female protagonist, extending her nurturing capabilities beyond the social expectations of the role of motherhood. Walker's perception of the experience of motherhood is developed in black feminist terms. *Meridian's* quest for self realisation is shown to be possible only after she rejects motherhood as an enviable state of existence. Walker shows through *Meridian* that women can be complete only when they create their own definitions and demolish oppressive social institutions. In contrast, Morrison's emphasis in *Beloved* is to delineate more specifically the psychological turmoil of the mother to highlight her humanity and point out actually the ambivalence in the experience of motherhood. Morrison also shows possible rejection of stereotyped views about motherhood. Still, Morrison, unlike Walker, does not negate the presence of complex responses to an experience and does not offer instant solutions.

Chapter VI entitled *The Individual as Questor : Search for*

*Connections* compares the quest for selfhood in Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), Toni Morrison's novels *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981). Search for connections is also the concern of experiential quests in the novels of predecessors. An individual's conflict with the existing condition as endured by the black community is at the root of Iola Leroy's search for a meaningful resolution. Larsen's novel *Quicksand* also explores the existential predicament of a mulatto woman within the black community and in the white society. A sense of alienation is present in all the novels but the nature of resolution of this alienation is conceived by Harper and Larsen in terms of going back to the black community which is seen as pure and unchanging. These novels therefore depict a monolithic perception about black culture and the community's past.

Walker's and Morrison's novels also show woman both as a questor and as an ancestral presence. As an ancestral presence the black woman activates the quest in the alienated individual. Walker's novel renders the nature of quest and its resolution in monolithic terms because 'past' as the source for self integration is glorified. Morrison's novels also use a female as an ancestor in *Song of Solomon* and a female as a questor in *Tar Baby* but Morrison perceives experience more as a flux, in a constant state of becoming and made up of contradictory impulses. She does not see the resolution of a questor's predicament in terms of a simplified retreat into the black community's past because, as *Tar Baby* shows, the 'past' itself is not static since each perceives and creates its presence in transitory terms. The evolving nature of experience stressed by Morrison makes for a

more mature perception of the nature of crisis in an individual and for a community.

*Chapter VII* is the **Conclusion**. The chapter draws together the findings of the preceding chapters. The findings confirm the point of inquiry of this study. A comparison of the writers' response to similar experiences indicates points of significant parallels and contrasts in the Afro-American women's literary tradition. It confirms that a study of the narrative strategies of novelists like Walker and Morrison - both contemporary, black and female - can highlight the universalist perception that each writer's vision is individual. The difference and the similarity are seen in terms of the nature of their remaking through preferred representational techniques images of Afro-American women different from existing images. The universalist approach locates points of continuity between novels and writers who perceive ambivalence in an experience. The study indicates that Toni Morrison's portrayal of black women is possibly more enduring as she perceives complexity at the heart of the Afro-American women's experience and creates fictional characters that resist being stereotyped into categories.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

For an African in American Society, the process of self determination has involved a very significant struggle out of a maze of stereotyped perceptions. The historical circumstances of slavery, struggle for basic human rights and an ongoing struggle against less blatant forms of racism have created a general view that Afro-American experience is more adequately understood through sociological approaches. A seriously felt limitation of such sociological approaches, though, is the orientation to explain complex human impulses in terms of constructs like race, gender, colour or class. Interpretation of experience through such one dimensional perceptions is inadequate for understanding the flux of emotions which are very much part of Afro-American experience but which are categorised only as race or gender issues. In contrast to them is the perception which is universalist in its concerns. A universalist approach refrains from defining the nature of an Afro-American woman's experience within categories of race, gender or colour. A universalist approach emphasises the multivalence in the experience which cannot be defined completely only in relation to fixed categories.

A critic with universalist perceptions therefore shows that being an Afro-American woman is not a condition which is basically different from that of another individual. As an individual trying to make coherent to oneself a complex array of experiential choices and responses, an Afro-American woman is similar to other women. A critic with universalist orientations



similar to other women. A critic with universalist orientations shows that in the more enduring of literary works the writers draw out not the difference but the oneness of human emotions irrespective of group affiliation of individuals. The responses to the experience of being a victim of violence, of being a social outcast, of being a wife caught in the eternal love triangle or a mother questioning the consequences of her choices are specific as well as individual. Therefore, it is inadequate to categorise individual responses within a fixed framework based on racial, gender or class affiliations. The difference in individual responses could be on account of many factors but a basic human impulse throbs within each one and that requires a broader perception. 89

In fact, Afro-American women's literary tradition grew out of this seriously felt need to express the basic human impulse within the Afro-American experience. Writers engaged the literary genre to bring about changes in existing attitudes and consequently bring forth the actual humanity of an Afro-American. Afro-American women writers felt an even more compelling need to articulate the repressed humanity of an Afro-American woman. If racist stereotypes blurred a clear view of the Afro-American male then for the Afro-American woman the struggle for self determination was against stereotypes that were not only racist, but sexist as well. The profusion of generalisations that surrounded the social perception of Afro-American experience seeped also into the critical perception of the creative representation of Afro-American women's experience. Approaches which were sociological in their stance strived to uphold the

experience of an Afro-American woman within a rhetoric of opposition which saw experience in terms of an either/or model. The rhetoric of opposition would see Afro-American woman either as a victim or as a victimiser.

Race based approaches to literature, like the Black Aesthetic Movement of 1960s and 1970s, stressed the need for portrayal of black women which emphasised their preferable situation as supporters of black males. Taking its cue from existing role expectations for black women, the Black Aesthetic Movement advocated creation of fictional images which validated the socially existing expectations. Therefore, the stress was on portraying black men as 'heroic challengers' of racism supported in their struggle by black women, who were cast in images of matronly figures - as 'mamas'. Black women were in their roles as 'mamas' seen as ones who were stoic, uncomplaining and always giving. Images of black women which deflected from such social norms were not regarded as authentic by race oriented critics. Such a view corroborated an existing social perception that possibly black women actually occupied a dominating position within the black community. Therefore, images of black women as 'emasculating matriarchs' were seen as fictional parallels of their domination of black males in actuality. Critics with orientations towards race based ideology upheld images which put black males in the position of victims and black women were seen as victimisers. Black men were seen as victims of black women as well as whites. As a result, black women were perceived within the rhetoric of opposition, either as a whore or as an emasculating matriarch thereby revealing the negative aspects of

the black males' perception of black women. Black women were preferred more in images of matrons and these were responded to positively by race oriented criticism.

Black feminists emphatically rejected such a perception of black women. The concern of black feminists has been to point out the inadequacy of race based critical approaches which see the black community only in relation to black males thereby reducing women to stereotyped images. Black feminists have striven to show that in excluding the strength and reality of black women's experience race based criticism was unable to grasp the Afro-American experience as a whole.

The aim of black feminists therefore has been to give voice to black woman's experience in order to have a complete perception of Afro-American experience. Black feminist ideology focused not only on the sexual oppression of black women. One of the major concerns of black feminists, in fact, has been also to highlight the causal connection between racist and sexist oppression. Struggle against sexism is crucial to black feminists but also important is the fight against racism. They suggest, therefore, 'the centrality of Afro-American women's shaping of a vision' which would show the inadequacy of the 'old, white, male, elitist- centered view of the universe'.<sup>1</sup>

Still, it is seen that both ideological assertions function on a rhetoric of victimization. Race based ideological

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<sup>1</sup>Christian, Barbara. "Trajectories of Self Definition : Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction". **Black Feminist Criticism : Perspectives on Black Women Writers**. New York : The Pergamon Press, 1985. 173.

approaches see black men as victims while black feminist ideology asserts that black women have been doubly wronged and are actually more victimised than black men. Black feminists therefore are in favour of those images of black women in fiction which highlight their experience as victims, and also show them as figures that are beginning to resist oppression. Critics like Barbara Christian, Gloria T. Hull, Barbara Smith are some of the representatives of the school of thought favouring images of women that portray them as rebels. Opposed to the feminist school were race based approaches, as advocated by Addison Gayle Jr. in his work *The Black Aesthetic* (1971), which were more supportive of images of black women as matronly figures living under the black male's protection. Race based critical approaches therefore disapproved of images of women as rebels of the black community.

Both approaches tend to define the entire gamut of Afro-American women's experience narrowly, polarising it either in reference to race or to gender. As such the race and gender based critical approaches prescribe a set of norms against which the adequacy or inadequacy of a literary representation of black women is to be analysed. More essentially approaches like these operate on the rhetoric that there is something intrinsically separate in the experience of an Afro-American woman. It is this separateness in terms of race, gender, colour or class which is focused upon as the determinant for the actual nature of an experience. The universalist approach as taken in this study refrains from seeing the difference in race or gender as the reason for seeing an Afro-American woman as victim or oppressor.

In fact the universalist perception does highlight the difference but with a view to individualising the complex responses and build up finally the humanity of the experience of an Afro-American woman. A crucial concern of a universalist critical perception is to draw out the complexity in an experience which would finally convey the inadequacy of labels of victim/oppressor, sinner/innocent or outsider/insider. This study takes an approach which is universal in the sense that it accepts the presence of multivalence in Afro-American experience and refrains from typecasting it within the rhetoric of victimisation and oppression. The universalist critical perceptions that make up the conceptual structure of this study desist from a view which sees whites/the rich/males as the only ones who are oppressors. Therefore, the critic contemplating the human situation without group bias perceives that it is possible for a victim in one experiential situation to be the oppressor in an another situation. It is not suggested that Afro-American women writers are better equipped in understanding the experience of an Afro-American woman. Not seeing a woman as a victim or as an oppressor the universalist approach in this study stresses that the nature of creative response varies from writer to writer and cannot be guaranteed by virtue of race or gender affiliation only. This study tries to show that women as portrayed by women writers are not necessarily seen only as victims or oppressors. The specificity of response depends on the nature of an individual writer's vision of the experience. In asserting the importance of individuality in creative response, as not finally framed by race or gender, this study takes a view which

recognises the variegated nature of experience not developed in the manifestos of race and gender based approaches to Afro-American women's literary tradition. To understand the relevance of a universalist perception for exploring the complex experiential dimensions of Afro-American experience it would be insightful to know the nature of inadequacy in sociological approaches that have race or gender based orientations.

## II

Feminists see women as victims of the patriarchal social structure and as a consequence question the myth of 'feminine mystique'. The myth is questioned because "it permits, even encourages women to ignore the question of their identity"<sup>2</sup>. For a feminist, self determination is not possible for a woman till she establishes an independent identity. A feminist is of the view that a woman has to break free from domination of males. Therefore, feminists advocate portrayal of women which shows them trying "to change this unwholesome situation".<sup>3</sup> The focus is on showing the change in the woman's condition from a state of victimisation to self determination. Feminists see the social norms associated with gender as responsible for the creation of stereotypes. And for feminists the shattering of gender based stereotypes is the primary step towards defining a woman's experience in totality.

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<sup>2</sup>Frieden, Betty. *"The Crisis in Woman's Identity"*. **The Feminine Mystique**. England : Penguin Books, 1965. 63.

<sup>3</sup>Messer - Davidow, Ellen. *"The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticism"*. **Gender and Theory**. ed. Linda Kauffman. Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1989. 90.

In a different vein the black feminists stress on shattering not only sexist but racist myths that surround a social perception of black women. Both, white feminists and black feminists, are of the view that the experience of a woman is intrinsically different from that of a male due to the nature of sexist oppression endured by her. Both groups stress, therefore, on the need for consciousness raising strategies - in life and in art - that trace a woman's oppression to the factor of gender. Both operate on the view that women's experience needs to be represented in terms which emphasise the impact of gender related issues. Still, the need to include struggle against racism as part of the overall struggle against sexism sets apart black feminists from white feminists.

Black feminist ideology grew out of a need to assert the separate nature of a black woman's existential crisis owing to the twin factors of race and gender. The crux of their ideological position was explicated in the "Combahee River Collective" statement :

"As black women we see Black Feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face."<sup>4</sup>

The concern of Black feminists is to approach the black women's experience from an 'antiracist' perspective 'unlike that of white women' and 'antisexist' perspective unlike that of black

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<sup>4</sup>Smith, Barbara et al, eds. *'A Black Feminist Statement : The Combahee River Collective'.* All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But some of us are Brave : Black Women's Studies. New York : The Feminist Press, 1982. 13.

and white men and realise 'the need to have solidarity around the fact of race'.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the objective of white feminists, the aim of black feminists is not an outright rejection of males. In fact, an added aim of black feminists is to acquire the support of black males for finally demolishing the racist social structure. Black women are basically seen as victims of racism and sexism by black feminists. It is to end their victimisation that black feminists make effort to create awareness in black men, who are also seen as part of the coterie of oppressors.

Black feminists advocate therefore portrayal of black women which embodies a "realisation that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors".<sup>6</sup> According to Barbara Smith, one of the first group of Black feminist literary critics, the portrayal of black women by black women writers would have conspicuous parallels "as a direct result of the specific political, social and economic experience they have been obliged to share".<sup>7</sup> Smith's stance is that "thematically, stylistically, aesthetically and conceptually black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature".<sup>8</sup> Black feminist literary criticism as advocated by Smith assumed that black women's experience was

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<sup>5</sup>Smith, *A Black*, 13.

<sup>6</sup>Smith, Barbara. "Toward Black Feminist Criticism". **All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies**. ed. by Barbara Smith, et al. New York : The Feminist Press, 1982. 159.

<sup>7</sup>Smith, *Toward*, 154.

<sup>8</sup>Smith, *Toward*, 154.



intrinsically different from a white woman's experience. All black women, according to Smith, faced oppression which was not only sexist but racist in nature. Smith assumes that all Black women therefore undergo similar experiences which are more authentically portrayed by black women writers. The assumption conveys that black feminist literary critics like Smith saw the portrayal of black women as relevant only if it cohered to the ideology of black feminism.

The ideology of black feminism as stated by critics like Barbara Smith upheld portrayal of black women which showed "*more emphasis on reflecting the process of self definition, rather than refuting the general society's definition of them*".<sup>9</sup> Barbara Christian belongs to the earlier group of black feminists who appreciated portrayal of Black women which indicated a "*self centered point of view*". Still, like Smith, Christian also favoured a positive representation of black women in as much as it showed the black woman's struggle against victimisation by black males and whites and her success in achieving selfhood through resistance of sexism and racism. According to critics like Barbara Smith and Christian, literary representations of black women if they highlighted the primacy of gender centered concerns of Afro-American women's experience were "*more complex*"<sup>10</sup>. At this point black feminist critics held up literary representation if it portrayed black women in terms which were

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<sup>9</sup>Christian, Barbara. **Black Feminist Criticism : Perspectives on Black Women Writers**. New York : The Pergamon Press, 1985. 175.

<sup>10</sup>Christian, **Images**, 8.

sitive' as per the ideological norms. In that sense black feminist literary criticism as expounded by critics like Barbara Smith, Barbara Christian, Gloria T. Hull and Mary Helen Washington has been more inclined towards a literary presentation which showed black women and not black males as 'heroic challengers', heroic challengers who rebelled not only against racism but sexism as well.

In seeing black women's experience within shades of victimisation black feminist literary critics had indicated that they saw black woman as a monolithic creature incapable of more than one kind of response at a point in an experience. The critics insisted that to move away from a state of victimisation it was required that black women writers portray women as challengers. Somewhere black feminist literary critics were replacing one stereotype of black woman as a victim with another, that of a black woman as a heroic challenger and a rebel against the society.

The focus on black women's struggle, as a significant aspect of a struggle actually against racism, was a departure from the focus on seeing "black male as the face of the race"<sup>11</sup>. The brand of "black nationalism"<sup>12</sup> that grew out of the Black Power Movement focused on translating the principles of the movement into art forms. The Black Aesthetic Movement conveyed the necessity to

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<sup>11</sup> McDowell, Deborah E. *"Boundaries or Distant Relations and Close Kin"*. *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*. eds. Houston A. Baker Jr. and Patricia Redmond. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1989. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Gayle, Addison, Jr. *The Black Aesthetic*. N.Y., Garden City : Doubleday and Co., 1971, 206.

portray black women in a manner that upheld the 'blackhood' of her experience. The portrayal of black men had to be 'heroic, beautiful and courageous' while black woman had to be portrayed in terms which brought out the essence of herself as a black rather than as a female. Therefore, her experience was portrayed within terms that saw the black male in a situation of control. The critics of Harlem Renaissance in 1930s also evinced a similar trend in their insistence on positive representation of the black community. In announcing the emergence of the "New Negro", Alain Locke in 1925 predicted the end of old 'unjust stereotypes',<sup>13</sup>. For Locke "the days of aunties, uncles and mammies, uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on". In making 'positive' representation of blacks as the sole criterion for judging the authenticity of literary representation, critics of Harlem Renaissance and Black Aesthetic Movement showed a perception of experience which was perhaps as monolithic as that of those Black feminist critics who favoured more a 'positive' literary representation of black women by Afro-American women writers.

Emerging out of this stress on positive representation of black women was the gradual shift in focus by black feminist critics on portraying the different shades of black woman's crisis of identity, as she struggled for selfhood resisting the stereotyped images created by racism and sexism. A woman writer was considered more significant if her work showed a conscious assimilation of black feminist consciousness. Therefore, fiction

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<sup>13</sup> Locke, Alain . "The New Negro". **The New Negro: An Interpretation.** ed. Alain Locke. New York, 1925. 3.

written by Francis E. W. Harper, Nella Larsen, Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fausset and Dorothy West was analysed from a black feminist perspective to see if the works cohered to the feminist norm of a positive image of black women. The works of these early writers were analysed to see if they incorporated a black feminist consciousness. If found lacking in the ideal portrayal of black women the works were frequently seen as minor within the literary tradition because the writer had seemed to address "not herself, black women or black people, but white countrymen"<sup>14</sup>.

Black feminist critical approach till this point functioned mainly on the view that black woman's experience needed a positive representation because a black woman had always been a victim. In her changed situation a black woman had to be portrayed positively. Therefore, the approach ruled out the possibility of more than one kind of response. It assumed that a black woman is always a victim and therefore she has to change her position to be a fighter against victimization. The process of her change is, according to the critics, best available in works of fiction which creatively represent the evolution of strong black female self. But, here too black feminist critics assume a monolithic black female self out there which is being searched for in a work of fiction. Instead of looking for in a work patterns of thematic strands which could indicate a writer's vision of experience, an essentialist black feminist approach enunciated by the earlier group of critics like Barbara Smith,

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<sup>14</sup>Christian, **Trajectories**, 173.

brought in ideological expectations from outside for analysing the work of fiction.

A pointer on the gradual shift in black feminist literary criticism's concerns is seen in Deborah McDowell's essay, "*New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism*" (1980). McDowell warned feminist critics of "the danger of political ideology yoked with aesthetic judgement".<sup>15</sup> Her alternative was "rigorous textual analysis" of black women's writings in order to reveal the "stylistic and linguistic commonalties across the texts of black women" that had been stressed earlier by Barbara Smith. The stress on decoding textual strategies as a means to discern the presence of feminist consciousness in works differentiates McDowell's approach from Barbara Smith's agenda of black feminist movement in the essay '*Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* (1977). Hazel Carby, another black feminist critic, states that Barbara Smith's "reliance on common experiences confines black feminist criticism to black women critics of black women artists depicting black women",<sup>16</sup>. Critics like Deborah McDowell and Hazel Carby represent the gradual shift in the focus of black feminist literary criticism. The possibility of more than one stream of black feminist thought shows presence of more than one kind of critical response to black woman's experience. Emergence of critical opinions different in their focus suggest that possibly

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<sup>15</sup> McDowell, Deborah E. "*New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism*". *Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*. ed. E. Showalter. New York: Pantheon, 1985. 65.

<sup>16</sup> Carby, Hazel. "*Rethinking Black Feminist Theory*". *Reconstructing Womanhood : The Emergence of the Afro-American Women Novelist*. New York : Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. 9.

black woman's identity was not as singular and monolithic as was assumed by the critical manifesto proposed by Barbara Smith. The idea "of reducing the experience of all black women to a common denominator" and limiting feminist critics to "an exposition of equivalent black female imagination" was regarded as "essentialist and ahistorical".<sup>17</sup> The growing concern amongst black feminist critics to dispel the myth of a singular black female identity, unified and whole, was reflected in their dissatisfaction with the idea of a "common black female language". This dissatisfaction implied that for the critics black female identity in works of fiction was not a static persona but an individual writer's expression of what he or she perceives to be significant in a black woman's experience. Since each writer responds from an inner creative vision it is difficult to assume the pattern of response only on the basis of a writer being black and female and writing about a black female. Generalisations limit recognition of complexity in any experience and deprive one of insights into the actual nature and depth of creative expression.

The emphasis on textual strategies indicated that perception of a black woman's representation came to be seen as manifestation of the writer's creation of "mythic structures".<sup>18</sup> Seeing "language" "not as a stockpile of referents or forms but

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<sup>17</sup>Carby, 10.

<sup>18</sup>McDowell, *New Directions*, 196.

an activity"<sup>19</sup>. Black feminist critics are trying to generate meanings about the experience from within the text and not impose them from outside.

The change in the nature of critical response by black feminists augurs a possible shift in the perception of the nature of the black woman's experience. The trend is no doubt towards decoding the representational strategies but the underlying emphasis is still on seeing how a work's techniques of representation show the affiliation to black feminist ideology.

The publication in 1989 of an anthology, **Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s**, shows the directions which black literary criticism seems to be taking at present. The anthology suggests programmes of investigation designed to "*alter the nature of concerns and methods that have marked the study of Afro-American literature*".<sup>20</sup> The anthology contains articles which stress the 'need to articulate the spaces of contradiction',<sup>21</sup> in Afro-American experience through exploration of 'literary archaeology',<sup>22</sup>.

Critics featuring in this anthology - Michael Awkward, Henry Louis Gates. Jr., Richard Yarborough, Barbara Johnson, William J. Andrews - to name a few, explore the different aspects of

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<sup>19</sup>Gates, Henry Louis. Jr. **Figures in Black : "Words", Signs and the Racial Self**. New York : Oxford University Press, 1987. 30.

<sup>20</sup>Baker, Houston A. Jr. and Patricia Redmond. eds. **Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s**. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1989. 227.

<sup>21</sup>Spillers, *Afro-American*, 72.

<sup>22</sup>Baker, *Afro-American*, 104.

Afro-American literary tradition from critical perspectives which are congenial in varying degrees to the critical approach taken in this study. The thematic commonalties between writers separated across years are understood better by exploring their individual strategies of representation which finally create an angle of vision.

Understanding the strategies of representation in works of predecessors like Hurston also help in knowing the artistic maturity of their vision and not seeing them as minor writers. Zora Neale Hurston, the Harlem Renaissance writer, is in fact regarded by feminist critics as the 'literary forerunner' of the black woman's literary tradition because her works are seen as "forerunner for the novels of 70s and 80s"<sup>23</sup>. Barbara Christian sees Hurston's significance in "radically envisioning the self as central", moving the portrayal from "a tragic mulatto" to a "more complex view of black women as it appears now in American literature"<sup>24</sup>. Hurston's fiction heralded the "second beginning and first real flowering" of Afro-American women's writing that made "artistic self consciousness an integral part of black woman's novel"<sup>25</sup>.

Black feminist critics see in Zora Neale Hurston's fiction the first movement towards individualization of black woman's

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<sup>23</sup>Christian, *Trajectories*, 173.

<sup>24</sup>Christian, *Images*, 14.

<sup>25</sup>Spillers, Hortense and Marjorie Pryse. eds. "Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and the "Ancient Power" of Black Women". **Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985. p. 14.



quest for selfhood in terms of seeing the self as female first and foremost. But, such a view of Hurston undermines actually the basic element of universality integrated into her creative vision. An analysis of Hurston's path breaking novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) confirms the veracity of her assertion that her aim was "to present the man as he is because no man's life can rarely be summed up in a word, even if that word is black or white"<sup>26</sup>. In shunning the stance of "the sobbing school of Negrohood", Hurston's representational strategies are indicators of her refusal to negate the complexities in Afro-American women's experience. Hurston's novels reveal a maturity of perception which refrains from glorifying black experience as per the prescribed ideal of Harlem Renaissance.

There were writers who refused to see black experience only in glorified terms as was the norm of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston is a representative example of such a mature creative vision functioning at the height of the Harlem movement. From a universalist perspective Hurston merits consideration not only because of her efforts to formulate complex female selfhood, but more crucially due to her humanized portrayal not only of black males but whites as well. Hurston's representation of Afro-American experience reveals an artistic vision which comprehends its ambivalence in spite of opinions to the contrary.

The artist's perception of presence of ambivalence in the experience is brought out with the help of a critical perspective

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<sup>26</sup>Hurston, Zora Neale. "How It Feels to be Colored Me". *I Love Myself: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. ed. by Alice Walker. New York: Feminist Press, 1979. 153.

that is universalist. It is possible to explore the individual nature of a writer's vision by close reading of fictional works. The method of close reading of texts from a universalist critical perspective can help to illustrate how each writer formulates patterns of significance. It is possible to compare the nature of writers' vision by analyzing individual responses to crucial strands of experience.

Afro-American women writers' portrayal of black women can be compared from a universalist perspective to see how writers at various points in the literary tradition respond to the experience. Close reading of the thematic strands of black women's fiction can reveal significant parallels and contrasts in individual writers' perception of Afro-American experience. The commonalties discerned by black feminist critics to uphold an ideal black female self are studied from a universalist point of view to show the presence of ambivalence in the experience.

For purposes of comparison, the portrayal of women by Afro-American women writers is undertaken here to see how individual writers have varying perceptions about an experience. The scope of the study is limited to comparison of works of fiction by *Alice Walker* and *Toni Morrison*. Both are important, contemporary Afro-American women writers. Their portrayal of black women provides insights into the nature of their individual visions. Responding to their fiction from a universalist perspective makes it possible to check if both writers respond similarly to a particular aspect of an experience. The method of close reading of texts explores the nature of similarity and difference in their response to certain significant strands of

experience related to black women.

### III

The quest for self realization by black women is the concern of novels by *Toni Morrison* and *Alice Walker*. Still, the contrastive nature of their creative visions is reflected in the different insights elicited from a comparative analysis. Both novelists are conscious artists who create symbolic equivalents which highlight their vision of black woman's experience. The nature of their vision influences their rendering of the experience in fictional terms.

Walker affirms that "her aim is to express the triumphs and travails of black women", to prove that "black women are the most fascinating creations in the world"<sup>27</sup>. Alice Walker's philosophy of 'womanism' is the essence of the nature of her creative perceptions. Her aim is to create fiction which upholds the strategy for 'survival of black men and women together'. Her emphasis is to draw female oriented resolution of identity crisis. *Toni Morrison*, in contrast, is of the view, that "some women are weak and frail and hopeless and some are not"<sup>28</sup>, so she would "like to write about both kinds". She sees "gender conflict" as "a cultural illness" and refrains from seeking "easy answers to complex questions".<sup>29</sup>

As contemporaries the parallels and contrasts in their

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<sup>27</sup> Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens : Womanist Prose*. San Diego: H. Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1983. xi.

<sup>28</sup> Morrison, Toni. "Interview". *Contemporary Literature*. 24.4 (Winter, 1983). 413-429.

<sup>29</sup> Morrison, Toni. "Interview". *Contemporary Literature*. 413-429.

approaches to experience reveal possibilities of more than one response to black woman's situation. References are also made in this study to representative works by predecessors. These references reveal the multiple nature of responses to Afro-American woman's experience in the works of early nineteenth century women writers. An awareness of the predecessors' responses to experiential strands that recur in the literary tradition can reveal parallels in perception among writers at different points of the tradition. The works of fiction by the early writers show their efforts to alter existing stereotyped perceptions of black womens' experience. The individual ability of the writer to show the contradictory impulses within the experience emphasizes the validity of a critical perception which refuses to perceive black woman's experience in relation to slots created by society. Perceptions in this study try to highlight the inadequacy of analysing experience in terms of a social label which reduces an individual's humanity to a convenient generalisation.

Themes recurring in the writings of Afro-American women's writing are rendered therefore according to the nature of the individual vision of the writer. The choice of novels for comparative study has been made keeping in view the relative importance of a particular theme in a group of novels. It is possible to have more than one thematic strand in a novel even as it is natural for individual experience to be multivalent in its priorities.

Victimization of black women has been a recurring thematic strand in the writings of Afro-American women writers. Yet, as

the second chapter shows it is possible for two contemporary women writers to respond differently to a particular experience. It is possible through a universalist approach to see the significance of Morrison's complex portrayal of black women as victims in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) in contrast to the womanist representation in Walker's novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970). The representation of black women's victimization was the concern of early black women writers too. The portrayal of contradictions in the experience of a black woman as a victim in Nella Larsen's novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) is evidence of a writer's effort to understand the complexity in an experience that has frequently been rendered in stereotyped images.

Entitled *Black Women as Victims : Exploring the Nature of Violence* the second chapter analyses the contrastive visions of Walker and Morrison. In *The Bluest Eye* though ostensibly the black male is the culprit - raping his own daughter - Morrison employs representational techniques which turn the moment of crime into a tragic illumination of the nature of the black male's victimization as well. In contrast, Walker's need to articulate the violence inflicted on black women results in silencing the black male metaphorically at the actual moment of the crime - murdering his wife. Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* develops the theme of victimization on the rhetoric of victim/oppressor while Morrison shows the ambivalence in the experience by evidences which finally question the validity of terms like victim and oppressor.

The Third chapter entitled *The Outcast in the Community : A*

*Different Kind of Presence* compares Walker's and Morrison's perception on the experience of a black woman as an outcast in the community. The chapter explores the nature of the writers' responses to labels of outcast/insider, pure/pariah, and innocent/sinner and tries to highlight the actual significance of these 'different' presences which a social perception may reduce to brutally exclusive categories. The concern is to see how these writers render the complexity inlaid into an experience that is generally stereotyped in simplistic terms.

Comparative references are made in this context to works of early women writers. Francis E. W. Harper's novel *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1929) and Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) provide instances of efforts by the predecessors of Walker and Morrison to render the experience of a 'pariah' figure in the community. The positive connotations in the outcast's experience reveal the early writers' effort to render the experience differently from stereotyped perceptions existing at the time.

The potential of the female outcast figure to be the healing presence for the community is central to Walker's and Morrison's exploration of the black woman's experience. It is possible, as is shown by their novels, that one who is placed outside the community is possibly in a better position to understand its contradictions. The outcast or the pariah thus becomes a positive point of reference in their novels.

*Sula* (1974) is Morrison's effort to show that the "pariahs

are often the conscience of the community"<sup>30</sup>. *Sula* shows the difficulty of finally saying who is actually the positive presence for the other. Both, the self-proclaimed innocent Nel, and the pariah, Sula, have to realize the simultaneity of contradictory impulses in their selves and try going beyond a perception of one's ownself as being completely innocent.

Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982) also shows that the outcast's presence is necessary because it makes possible the questioning of victimization of black women in the community. Equally important is the concern which portrays the pariah figure Shug as crucial for bringing about change in the black male's attitude towards black woman. Shug in *The Color Purple* is branded as an outcast because of her liaisons with white men. She is also labelled as a whore for consorting with husbands of black women like Celie who are part of the society. Still, it is actually Celie's relationship with Shug that initiates her on the path of self realization. The novel validates the presence of an outcast figure. In contrast Morrison's concern in *Sula* is to define the experience of the pariah more in ambivalent terms when it becomes unrealistic to categorize an individual in either positive or negative terms.

Closely related to the quest for identity in women is the need to question the nature of their situation in society. This means a questioning of their roles as wives and mothers as well. The negotiation of identity crisis is done by exploring the

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<sup>30</sup> Morrison, Toni. "An interview". *Contemporary Literature*. 24, No. 4 (Winter, 1983). 413-429.

nature of these experiential situations. The black woman's experience and the need for self realization is incomplete without an understanding of her experience of matrimony and motherhood.

The fourth chapter is entitled *Images of Wives : The (Un) Settled Marriage* and it explores Morrison's and Walker's portrayal of black women as wives. The institution of marriage is explored in Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and Morrison's novel *Jazz* (1992). The aim is to see the nature of their individual visions and gain an insight into the complexity within the experience.

Earlier, Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) written at a time when black culture was glorified had resisted easy generalisation of the experience. Instead, Hurston's novel is an enduring expression of a mature perception which does not see matrimony for black women within a rhetoric of opposition but draws out the complex impulses making up responses to the experience. Hurston's vision of the experience moves the novel beyond the reductive dichotomy of husband as an oppressor and wife as a victim. Drawing the black female's quest for identity within the matrimonial experience Hurston renders its complex dimensions that move the experience beyond race or gender specific concerns.

The memory mode of narration employed by Walker in *The Temple of My Familiar* traces the nature of black woman's oppression by males or whites in every institutionalized social interaction. Tracing back to prehistoric times the exploitation and subjugation of black women as and when relations become



institutionalized, Walker provides a historical perspective from which to perceive the oppression of black women within matrimony in the present context.

In *Jazz* Morrison's aim is also to question the nature of the experience of matrimony. What distinguishes her vision from Walker's is evident in the rendering of the significant experiential strands in the novel. Using the structural analogy of musical narrative form of *Jazz*, Morrison's vision of ambivalence of the matrimonial experience is brought out effectively. Unsettlement, as is revealed in the novel, is not caused by the imbalance of power distribution between husbands and wives. Morrison instead conveys in *Jazz* the presence of unsettlement as a natural consequence of any relationship based on false expectations. *Jazz* in contrast to *The Temple of My Familiar* makes it possible to see the presence of contradictory and complex impulses as integral to black woman's experience, so much so, it is possible to see through Morrison's vision complexity in an experience which has been generally perceived through a film of reductive stereotypes.

Motherhood, in its very symbolic essence, has been seen as a condition of exalted humanity for women. The concern of the feminist movement to shatter the 'feminine mystique' has led to a questioning of the glorified image of motherhood. Within the black community motherhood has been exalted as an experience and possibly as the only source of sustenance against the ravages of racism and sexism. Exploring the nature of black woman's quest for identity black women writers offer alternative perceptions on motherhood.

The Fifth chapter entitled *Woman as Nurturer : Changing Perceptions of Motherhood* compares Walker's and Morrison's responses to the experience of motherhood in their novels *Meridian* (1975) and *Beloved* (1989) respectively.

Earlier writers like Ann Petry's *The Street* published in 1946 and Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* published in 1954 are also significant in their treatment of motherhood as an experience. These works merit consideration as they depict black woman's experience of motherhood from a perspective which does not negate the complexity intrinsic to it. In so doing Petry and Marshall become early examples of artistic maturity. Their effort to render the experience of motherhood not as an unvarying condition but as a situation inlaid with complexity indicates parallels with the vision of Walker and Morrison.

Walker's novel *Meridian* questions existing notions about motherhood. *Meridian* gives up her son to go on a personal quest for selfhood and in doing so violates the norms of society. But, Walker's novel shows that the experience of motherhood is more to do with the instinct to nurture and this does not grow naturally only out of the physical condition of being a mother. In fact, as the novel shows, *Meridian's* personal quest becomes the basis for shaping in her a more genuine response towards the experience of motherhood and seeing it in terms of an emotional capacity to nurture a life. The capacity to nurture, the novel shows, can exist apart from the physical experience of motherhood.

Morrison in *Beloved* is also in broader terms concerned with the conflict within Sethe, the slave mother who kills her infant daughter to save her from degradation of slavery. The dimensions

of conflict within Sethe in the aftermath of the murder shows that the site of conflict is internalized. In revealing the nature of the introspection undergone by Sethe, Morrison's complex perception of the experience of motherhood is highlighted. The return of the slain daughter's ghost back into Sethe's fold throws up into Sethe's face questions she had kept at bay. Posing the questions through Sethe's conflict-torn consciousness, Morrison is exploring the impact of one individual's decision on another. It is difficult to say perhaps even of a mother whether what she decides for the child is always right. The nature of Sethe's internalized trauma alters perceptions on motherhood through the focus on her emotional crisis. In Walker's novel, her perception of Meridian's crisis for identity is resolved by showing her to be a nurturer in a more authentic sense. In her search for a meaningful expression of herself Meridian's disregard for society's tarnished image of her as a mother acquires significance. Creation of a new perception of motherhood through Meridian is attempted to offer alternative images of black women's experience. Morrison's focus in *Beloved* is not to see the experience of motherhood in terms of choices for or against it. The focus is to show the ambiguous reality of the choices made and the difficulty of making an option.

Implicit in the effort of Afro-American writers to recreate perceptions has been the need to render the quest in ways which give the journey specifically black as well as universal meanings. The Sixth chapter entitled *The Individual as Questor : Search for Connections* focuses on different dimensions of a

quest.

Afro-American experience has been seen as possessing elements which create relevance of the quest theme. Dissatisfaction with the existing condition and the effort to change it constitute the quest of an individual. Going with this definition of quest, it is possible to see an element of quest, a feeling of search even in an earlier work like Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928). This experiential concern is developed with far greater maturity and artistic skill by Hurston in delineating the quest of Janie towards selfhood in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Gwendolyn Brook's novella *Maud Martha* (1954) and Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for the Widow* (1989) also delineate the journey towards self realization in black girls and black women.

A point of difference between these early efforts and Walker and Morrison's novels is that, unlike the earlier writers, both Walker and Morrison render the questor's search for self realization through a facilitating agent, an ancestral figure who initiates the sense of quest in the alienated individual. In the present context, when the notion of going back to roots is looked at with skepticism, Walker and Morrison focus more on individualising the nature of crisis and its resolution. The idea is to show the necessity of a quest in terms of a sense of individual responsibility. Walker and Morrison emphasize that an alienated individual evinces dichotomy in response towards every experiential aspect. The novels chosen for the analysis of the theme of quest are Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981) and Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989).

In two novels, *Song of Solomon* and *The Temple of My*

*Familiar*, the ancestral figure is a woman, while in *Tar Baby* the black male is shown to possess qualities which accentuate the sense of alienation within the black female. The nature of experience in *Tar Baby* is shown to be far too complex to be resolved simplistically.

Suwelo's quest in *The Temple of My Familiar* is facilitated directly by Ms. Lissie, the ancestral figure. Still, the underlying concern is to show the impact of change in Suwelo, in his approach towards women. In tracing the historicity of oppression against black women Ms. Lissie's memories are designed to orient Suwelo towards realization of his cruelty towards the women in his life. Thus, the female ancestral figure Ms. Lissie shows the root cause of his existing emotional stasis to be rooted in his alienation from the ancient principles which empowered women. Walker creates a quest in the present social situation and gives the racial specificity a measure of contemporary relevance.

Similar is the aim of Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*. In Pilate, Morrison provides a facilitating agent for Milkman, the alienated individual. The nature of crisis of identity is seen more in terms of the absence of a sense of responsibility towards others. Thus, the basis of Pilate's initiation of Milkman is not to embark on a search for cultural precedents in the black cultural past. The basis of search is personalized. Morrison makes this succinctly evident by showing Pilate, an outcast in all senses of the term, as actually providing Milkman with insight into the nature of his crisis. Walker in her novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, develops the notion of a cultural past as

a monolithic psychological and social condition. Her aim is to show women as oppressed and men as oppressors and to suggest ways for change in the black woman's condition. In Walker's view change is possible by assimilating the norms of the black community's cultural heritage. Morrison's novel, in contrast, develops the notion of past as dynamic and ever changing by showing different responses to a similar event in the past. It becomes difficult in *Song of Solomon* to see men as only oppressors.

*Tar Baby* has a female protagonist Jadine who is alienated and her relationship with Son, a black male, embodying symbolically the values of the past, forms the crux of the experiential conflict in the novel. Morrison extends her perception of experience as a flux which is not wholly comprehended in terms of blocs of past, present or future. The open-endedness of the novel shows that Morrison hesitates to see 'past' as a glorified entity in the black community. In fact, the novel reveals rupturing of experience into complex fragments which cannot be explained simplistically in terms of an African past. The complex nature of Afro-American experience cannot be satisfactorily defined within the slots of past, present or future. Therefore, a critical approach which is universalist in emphasis is better able to grasp the open-endedness of the experience.

The Seventh Chapter is the *Conclusion*. In summing up the individual observations of each chapter the conclusion points out the significant thematic patterns in the works of fiction by Toni Morrison in comparison with those of Alice Walker's. The

observations also point out the significant contribution made by early Afro-American women writers. Writers like Zora Neale Hurston are the most representative examples of mature creative perceptions at an early point in the Afro-American literary tradition. Their works show a growing concern to see Afro-American women's experience in all its variegated colours and finally show the inadequacy of categorising individual needs and desires within a rhetoric of opposition.

Alice Walker and Toni Morrison's works reveal a continuing concern to render the woman's experience with greater depth and complexity. Alice Walker attempts to create in her novels images of women which are not generalisations of race based ideology. Still, Walker's rendering of the experience within explicit 'womanist' terms makes her fiction less convincing when compared with the portrayal of women in the works of Toni Morrison. Morrison's portrayal, as the study shows, conveys a more mature and convincing rendering of the moments of ambivalence within the Afro-American woman's experience. The nature of Morrison's vision is such that stereotyped images of an Afro-American woman's experience become inadequate for grasping its pluralistic nature. Morrison's fiction, therefore, is a more enduring recreation of black women's experiential realities.

The universalist approach makes it possible to understand the nature of complexity within an experience by demonstrating the possibility of diverse responses to experiential situations which may share similar group specific concerns. This study validates its conceptual concerns that the black women's experience is as complex and multivalent as any other experience, and therefore a study of its complexities gains from a critical perspective which is universalist.

## CHAPTER II

### BLACK WOMEN AS VICTIMS : EXPLORING THE NATURE OF VIOLENCE

#### I

A study of the complex nature of violence that marks black women's lives also makes it possible to understand the humanity of their oppressors. The history of violence specific to black experience has created and strengthened a view of black women as hapless victims of racism and sexism. Still, it is not possible to comprehend the nature of a black woman's victimization if the experience of those labelled as oppressors - whites and black males - is not perceived from a broader, a universalist point of view. Black feminist literary critics see in the works of Afro American women writers a consistent concern to highlight the element of victimization. Black feminist critics see in their works a continuous movement towards feminist consciousness. The works by Afro-American women writers are analysed by black feminist critics to validate their view that, sexism is more oppressive than racism.

Black women are considered to be more victimised than black men. Black men, the critics state, endure the physical violence inflicted by a racist white society but within the black community it is they who hold a dominating position, whereas black women are victimised on account of gender as well as race.

The inadequacy of seeing black males as inveterate victimisers of black women is evident if the theme of victimization is analyzed from a universalist perspective. Unlike feminist and race based approaches, the universalist perspective



is able to draw out the underlying complexities in black woman's experience. Race and gender based approaches see black women either as oppressors or as victims of black men. In contrast is the universalist perception which focusses on the complex nature of responses of an individual. This is a more mature view of the Afro-American women's experience which has more often been perceived in terms of one or the other stereotyped image.

This chapter analyses the portrayal of black women as victims in Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The contrastive nature of Walker and Morrison's world view influences the portrayal of women in the two novels.

## II

The portrayal of black women as victims of violence, racial and sexual, has also been at the centre of the concerns of nineteenth century Afro-American women writers. The figure of a 'tragic mulatto' was created by Afro-American writers to highlight the nature of a black woman's sexual victimization by white masters. *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted*, published in 1892, was the first novel in English by an Afro-American woman writer. The writer, Francis E. W. Harper, in this novel, engaged the symbolic potential of a mulatto's tragic experience to render the injustice of racism in American society. *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), novels by Nella Larsen also focus on the experiential dilemma of a mulatto. The depiction of sexual abuse and psychological violation was intended to accentuate the tragic finality in the victimization of the female protagonist. The

figure of the tragic mulatto was used by women writers to create an immediate, symbolic statement about the sexual violation of a black woman. In novels written in the nineteenth century the nature of sexual violence was emphatically traced to racial discrimination. The works of novelists like Nella Larsen, Jessie Fausset belonged to the 'school of passing'. Novels in this genre depicted the travails of mulatto women who passed off as whites in society. The novelists attempted to give a complex portrayal of the psyche of the mulatto, but moralising, nonetheless, that the woman's victimization resulted from racist attitudes in society.

Contemporary Afro-American women writers like *Alice Walker* and *Toni Morrison* also portray black women as victims of violence. The novels discussed in this chapter show black women as victims of black men. Mem is murdered by her husband Brownfield, in Walker's novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* while Pecola is raped by her father in Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Black feminist critics see the experiential concerns of these novels as effective statements of black feminist ideology.<sup>1</sup> A study of the strategies of narration employed by Walker and Morrison to depict the experience of victimization points out the parallels and contrasts in their visions.

The scene of rape in *The Bluest Eye* is not narrated from the victim's perspective. In line with her concern to see experience from the point of view of those conventionally cast as culprits,

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<sup>1</sup>Wade-Gayles, Gloria. "Going Nowhere Immediate : Black Women of Hopelessness". **No Crystal Stair : Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction**. New York : The Pilgrim Press, 1984. p.114-144.

Morrison narrates the rape scene through the consciousness of the rapist, Cholly Breedlove. This gives an alternative perception not only on the black woman's condition as a victim but also on the black male's situation as an oppressor. Such strategic shifts in the narrative are placed elsewhere too when the victim's voice is actually silenced at the very moment of her victimization. In creating Pecola's silence Morrison emphasizes the specific nature of individual response to a crisis. The difference in technique of representation blankets articulation of her condition and also accentuates Pecola's passivity. Morrison shows concern for the oppressor as well as the victim. The shift into Cholly's consciousness upholds Morrison's view that black men too can be victimised. By showing Pecola's parents - Pauline and Cholly - as victims Morrison succeeds in conveying that victimization is caused not by sexual violence alone. The novel shows that violence is not only physical but psychological as well.

Walker's narrative strategy in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* to choose the consciousness of Ruth, daughter of the murdered victim Mem, for narrating the moment of the crime also aims to alter images of black women. This shift builds up Brownfield's character in completely negative terms. He comes across as totally vile and inhuman at the critical moment. What this shift does is to explicate Walker's perception on black women's victimization by black men. Walker sees black men as victimisers of black women. This is the reason that Brownfield's crime processed through his own child gives force to Walker's view that black men are responsible for the break up of the family, for

jeopardizing the lives of their children and abusing women in the family.<sup>2</sup>

Black men, in Walker's view need to recognize the extent of their responsibility for violence inflicted on black women. The centre of Walker's novel therefore is Grange Copeland's "third life". The changed perspective of Grange towards women in the black community is aimed to be in stark opposition to the brutality exhibited by his son Brownfield. The change in Grange, which he terms as his "third life" is Walker's proposed alternative life situation for women.<sup>3</sup>

The shift into Ruth's narrating voice at the scene of Mem's murder is strategic. It creates a sense of horror about the inevitable degradation awaiting Ruth and her younger sisters. The experiential focus is on Grange's third life whose significance is drawn in the context of Ruth's childhood. Grange having undergone the transition recognises his responsibility for the suicide of his wife Margaret and the moral debasement of his son. Grange saves Ruth from a situation of emotional deprivation similar to the one which had been faced by his son, Brownfield. The shift from Ruth's consciousness to authorial narration is strategised to highlight Walker's affirmation of the benedictory impact on Ruth due to the 'third life' realisation in Grange.

Walker says in an interview, "my concern in *The Third Life of*

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<sup>2</sup>Harris, Trudier. "Violence in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*". *CLA Journal*, 19 (December 1975). 238-247.

<sup>3</sup>Butler, Robert James. "Making a Way out of No Way : The Open Journey in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*". *Black American Literature Forum*, 22 (Spring 1988). 65-79.

*Grange Copeland* was to show the growth of little Ruth"<sup>4</sup>. The periodic shifts into Ruth and Grange's consciousness show the manner in which their lives are changed for the better by each other. Walker wants to show the effect of a supportive, emotionally enriching environment on Ruth. Ruth is also shown to experience racism similar to the one confronted by Brownfield in his childhood. Nevertheless, the reason for the differences in their response to a similar social situation is explained in terms of the life affirming environment available to Ruth in Grange's home. Such an enriching environment was not there for Grange's son, Brownfield. The shift into Ruth's consciousness to show her responses to Josie; Grange's second wife; to the racism in school; to her father Brownfield and to her own identity as a black girl shows the benedictory impact of Grange's realisation on the 'survival whole'<sup>5</sup> of Ruth.

It is the recognition of his culpability that forms the basis for Grange's assertion, "I know the danger of putting all the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life. I fell into the trap myself" (TTL of GC, 207)<sup>6</sup>. The process by which Grange has reached this perception is delineated through intermittent shifts in narrative voices. From authorial statements that provide information and move the narrative

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<sup>4</sup>Walker, Alice. "Interview". *Black Women Writers at Work*. ed. Claudia Tate. New York : Continuum, 1983. 96.

<sup>5</sup>Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens : Womanist Prose*. San Diego : H. Brace Jovanovich Publisher. 1983, xi.

<sup>6</sup>All reference to *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) pertains to the H.B. Jovanovich edition (1970) parenthetically given in the text, using the abbreviation TTL of GC.

further, the shifts are into dialogical scenes as well. Margaret's plea "Grange, save me! help me!" (TTL of GC, 178) as she struggled in futility against the white supervisor is placed between Grange's reminiscences to Ruth about his journey to the 'third life'. The strategy is intended to add not only pathos to Margaret's portrait but to show the extent of Grange's responsibility in Margaret's suicide. Yet, this is revealed at a point in the narrative when Grange's 'third life' has been benevolent for Ruth. Consequently, it is not possible to impugn Grange for his wrong doing. What becomes essential at this point is the difference between Grange and Brownfield. In order to show the immense struggle of self questioning faced by Grange the narrative moves spatially backward to show his wilful drowning of a white woman in New York. That moment became the point of subsequent change. The shifts into Grange's life preceding the 'third life' are intended to highlight the direct co-relation between a black woman's experience of victimization and a black man's feeling of being betrayed by her but which is actually caused due to the control of the white man. To change the black woman's condition of victimization due to violence, the urgent need, Walker emphasises, is for the black man to change, since he is, as the novel shows, the oppressor.

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* therefore the shift from Ruth's voice to authorial voice is strategic. It builds on the argument postulated which further strengthens the portrayal of Brownfield's transformation into a completely vile and ruthless man. Grange's changed self perceptions are placed alongside

Brownfield's inveterate debauchery to create preferences in the reader. Ruth's well being is the focus of the latter part of the novel and that is ensured only in Grange's home. The shift in the voice is strategised to uphold the writer's perception on possible changes in the lives of victims of violence. The shift in narrative voice after the rape scene in *The Bluest Eye* also builds up Morrison's complex perception of a black woman's experience of violence and abuse. Both writers shift the voices from their conventional positions in experience but for different purposes. Walker's aim is to highlight the condition of black female as a victim. Morrison, in contrast tries to show the victimization of not only black females but males too. Also, Morrison indicates in the novel the complex nature of violence itself which resists simplified definitions of victimization.

Pecola's rape is filtered through Cholly's consciousness but the reader also feels an authorial voice hovering over as well. It is this voice which conveys Pauline's callous response to her daughter. The shift into authorial voice, after Pecola's rape, continues with a detailed portrait of Soaphead Church. What the shift does is to actually show the broken centres in Pecola's experience. The shift into Soaphead's life is abrupt, it is unconnected. In fact, it has no immediate, no visible connection to Pecola's plight after her rape. There are actually no connections in Pecola's life. This absence of connecting links is brought out most graphically through the shifts into narrative voices which on the face of it have no interrelation.

Perhaps, this is precisely Morrison's perception of the

victim's experience. The shift into Soaphead Church's life explains what is done elsewhere too that it is not possible for others to be aware of the victimization of another individual. Each in the novel is shown to live in one's "own cell of consciousness" (TBE, 31)<sup>7</sup>. The narrative shows the presence of victimization in the lives of others too besides Pecola. The presence of connections in the narrator Claudia's family indicates the individually specific contrasted nature of Pecola's situation. The absence of connections which are essential for an integrated self are shown to be the source of Pecola's absence of a sense of self worth. The toll taken by such absences takes different forms for survival in Pecola and her family.

The shift into narration of Soaphead Church's life is therefore part of the shifts elsewhere in the narrative too which emphasise Morrison's perception of Pecola's victimization. On the surface there are no connections between Pecola's rape and the narrative about Soaphead Church. Yet, the writer wants to show that given the state of inversions<sup>8</sup> it is possible that connections are present even in the most unforeseen situations. Pecola utters her desire for 'blue eyes' for the first time in the narrative to Soaphead. This is at one level an indictment of the parent's attitude towards the helpless child. In her trauma she has to seek succour from outside. Yet, the nature of her request

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<sup>7</sup>All references to *The Bluest Eye* (1970) pertain to the Pocket Books edition (1972) and are parenthetically given in the text, using the abbreviation TBE.

<sup>8</sup>Weever, Jacqueline De. "The Inverted World of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*". *CLA Journal*, 22, No. 4 (June 1979). 402-414.



- "My eyes" .... "I want them blue" (TBE, 137) - points out to the specificity of Pecola's response to her situation. After her rape she can visualize an escape from the indifference and ridicule only through possession of blue eyes. To process Pecola's request after her rape through Soaphead's narrating consciousness is the writer's strategy to show finally the dismal consequence of Pecola's passivity. The request, as it comes at this point, in the novel shows that Pecola's desire for 'blue eyes' is not outcome of her racial and sexual subordination. Instead of the 'blue eyes' it could be the desire for any other thing. The point of concern, to Morrison, is not the kind of desire but the reason for such a desire. The reason has been emotional deprivation within the family.

The shift into Soaphead Church's life and his consciousness is therefore in line with the writer's concern to show the impact of environment in creating a desire for blue eyes in Pecola. The shift is strategic because it does not detail Pecola's tragic plight after the rape nor does it show the tensions between parents or within the family due to the act. The shift instead forces the reader's gaze visibly away from Cholly. In the very move Morrison accentuates the tragic dimensions of Pecola's experience. This is not a lone occurrence, because at other points too in the narrative Pecola's voice is silenced at the most abysmal moments that show her turmoil.

The complex nature of an experience is articulated by Morrison's strategising the voice of narration. Pecola's desire for 'blue eyes' is not shown as a simple case of imposition of

'white master's values'. The narrative shows the desire for blue eyes linked with the need to escape from her environment so that they will "not do bad things in front of her" (TBE, 40). This is borne out in the scene where Pecola voices for the first time, in her consciousness, the desire for blue eyes. This is the moment of the early morning quarrel between Pauline and Cholly. The timing of the expression of the desire in her consciousness conveys the source of the individualised nature of her need for blue eyes. It also points out the nature of her self and her passivity that aggravates the sense of victimization in her.

Like the shift in voice after the rape of Pecola, the narrative has other instances which convey Morrison's alternative perception on the victimization of a black girl or a black woman. The feeling of immense pity and pain that sweeps over the reader as Pecola is raped by Cholly is akin to the immense disgust also felt by the reader on seeing Cholly's humiliation as an adolescent by white men. The feeling roused is the same because Morrison shows that the nature of damage is similar for both Pecola and Cholly. Not seeing Cholly as only a rapist is made possible by description of his entire life immediately before the rape.

The writer uses alternate modes of narration - authorial and first person account - to detail the complex humanity of Cholly as well. The narrative shift into first person account at significant phases of his experience is important for shaping the chequered nature of his perceptions. The narrative technique of first person account here builds up Cholly as a human being capable of emotions, capable of being hurt and not someone who is

innately a 'rapist', 'shiftless', a 'drunkard' because he is a black man. The authorial voice, intermittently, provides information into his birth and childhood. Found in a "junk heap", "rejected for a crap game by his father" (TBE, 126) Cholly's childhood is marked by reminders of obligations by his Aunt Jimmy. The conversations between Cholly and his aunt are recorded in a dialogical mode to accentuate the impact of such an environment. They provide the psychological basis for his subsequent need to search for connections, the search for his father.

Morrison shows that Cholly too is a victim of a different kind of violation to his self. The narrative moves into Cholly's consciousness as he narrates the degrading finale to his first adolescent sexual encounter. An immense feeling of self loathing fills Cholly as he writhes in agony to the commands of the white hunters, "make it good, nigger! Come on, Coon Faster" (TBE, 117). The narration through Cholly's consciousness manages to intensify the feeling of pity for him. The feeling of sympathy is maintained by a further shift into Cholly's consciousness as he faces an indifferent rebuttal from his father. These shifts are crucial since they create a view of Cholly which is humane and which makes it possible to understand the nature of his victimised condition as well. He too has been at the receiving end of violence. Seeing Cholly's victimization as a different kind of violation - psychological - finally makes it difficult to see Pecola's rape as an act of a dominating black male using sexual assault to exercise control over black women. In an interview, Morrison says, "when you get to the scene where the father rapes

the daughter which is as awful a thing, it's almost irrelevant because I want you to look at him and his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her in pain"<sup>9</sup>.

It becomes possible to understand the confusion and the tragedy of Pecola and Cholly when the authorial voice interjects just before the rape, "what could a burned out black man give to the hunched form of his eleven year old daughter?" (TBE, 127). Thus, the choice of Cholly as the narrator of rape scene is emerging naturally out of the pathetic nature of the experience. This is so because the earlier evidences of Cholly's life have added to a view which does not see Pecola's rape in terms of her victimization by a black male. The shift is in line with the experiential logic of the narrative which shows the difficulty of seeing black males as invariably the oppressors.<sup>10</sup> The universalist perspective helps to see the contrastive vision of Toni Morrison which is not seen from a feminist point of view<sup>11</sup>.

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* also the shift into Ruth's consciousness is emerging out of the experiential logic in the narrative details preceding Mem's murder. Immediately before the murder an authorial narrative voice records the lowest point

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<sup>9</sup>Morrison, Toni. *Interview*. **Black Women Writers at Work**. ed. Claudia Tate. New York : Continuum, 1983 .89.

<sup>10</sup>Awkward, Michael. "Roadblocks and Relatives: Critical Revision in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*". **Critical Essays on Toni Morrison**. ed. Nellie McKay. Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1988. 57-67.

<sup>11</sup>Miner, Madonne. "Lady No Longer Sings the Blues : Rape, Madness and Silence in *The Bluest Eye*". **Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and the Literary Tradition**. eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1985. 96.

in Mem and Brownfield's relationship. As a consequences, Mem is forced to return to the country, back to the squalid surroundings which she had fought against earlier. The move back is shown to snuff out something in Mem. This is emphasised symbolically in Mem's decision not to plant flowers anymore. At this point Mem is portrayed as the helpless black woman who struggles to give a better life to her children and Brownfield is shown to be the brutal black male.

The image of Brownfield as an irredeemable degenerate is depicted in sharp contours through the narrating consciousness of his daughters Ruth, Ornette and Daphne explaining the nature of strife between Mem and Brownfield. To amplify the effect of Brownfield's oppressiveness an inside view of Mem's despair and anger is also conveyed. When Mem wishes within her self, "she wanted to leave him but there was no place to go" (TTL of GC, 58), the writer is indicating the specificity of Mem's situation, as well as providing the victim with a voice to move beyond a passive acceptance of her situation. The narrative voice shifts into the consciousness of the victim's children and the victim herself, Mem, are aimed to prove that vileness is innate in Brownfield. This is done by giving an inside view of Brownfield's responses to instances of violence on Mem and the children. What the shift does is to explicate Walker's vision that Brownfield is a typical black male who is shiftless, drunkard, violent and irresponsible in his attitude towards his own self and his family. The picture created of Mem is that of a victim enduring the unending violence inflicted on her body and her mind, by Brownfield, only for the

sake of her children.

The writer's concern to explicitly draw the victimization of Mem by Brownfield culminates in the murder of Mem. The movement of the narrative from Brownfield's marriage to Mem and finally her murder at his hands is carried out to highlight Walker's perception that black women are always the victims of violence inflicted by black males. Since Walker perceives victimization of women as an inevitable consequence of gender domination the alternative life situation for Ruth is created interestingly through Grange's third life concerns.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, a sense of inadequacy is discernible in the portrayal of Brownfield. This is especially dissatisfying because Brownfield has at one point been shown also as a victim and an innocent witness like Ruth. Therefore, his transition to a brutal man requires some insight into the nature of his trauma as well. This insight is not made available because the rendering of Brownfield's change does not account for the nature of his trauma and the consequent change in him. The inside view of Brownfield's consciousness after murdering his wife and the nature of his responses instead manage to highlight the concept that vileness was natural to him and these make Grange's third life realisations even more crucial for every black male. The shifts into Brownfield's consciousness justify Ruth's repulsion for him and

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<sup>12</sup>Esslen, Klaus. "Collective Experience and Individual Responsibility : Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*". *The Afro-American Novel since 1960*. ed. Peter Bruck and Wolfgang Karrer. Amsterdam : B.R. Gruner Publishing Co., 1982. 114-135.

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her terror at the prospect of living again with him.

There is a palpable sense of inadequacy in Brownfield's portrayal because the narrative of his childhood and adolescence does not prepare the reader for this disastrous change in him. It is of significance that the relationship of Grange and his wife Margaret is rendered through the narrating consciousness of Brownfield. The aim is to show the impact on children and the consequent shaping of their personalities in a strife torn family environment. But no inside view of Grange and Margaret is given in the narrative. The strife in their relationship is recorded through Brownfield's vision. In contrast, the violence in Mem and Brownfield's relationship is recorded not only by their children but by the parents themselves. The shifts in narrative voices are placed at moments which hold up Mem as the victim and Brownfield as the oppressor. Such clear cut defining of experiential situations is not available in the earlier sections on Grange and Margaret. The focus at that point had been to show the impact of tensions between parents on the impressionable mind of Brownfield. At that point Brownfield himself is shown as a victim. Later, the shifts into Mem and Brownfield's consciousness highlight the sexist basis of black woman's victimization which is different from the racist emphasis in the delineation of Brownfield's condition as a child. The change in the emphasis aggravates the impression of Brownfield as an oppressor and proves that he is beyond repair.

Walker's need to show the relevance of the third life of Grange becomes an exposition of her perception on what is the



alternative to victimization of black women. In fact, this part of the narrative does not come out fully from within the experiential logic of the earlier narrative. The need to show the significance of Grange's third life for Ruth leads to a lopsided portrayal of Brownfield. This in consequence does not hold up the experience in totality.

Morrison's concern is not to show black women as victims, black men as oppressors, or the change required in black men towards women before the community can attain survival as a whole. *The Bluest Eye* does not show Cholly humane at one point and totally inhuman at another. Pecola's sense of victimization is seen in relation to her own passivity towards experience and to a different kind of violation of Cholly. Pauline, Pecola's mother, represents the image of a typical 'mammy' - the black woman as a loyal servant in the household of whites. The stereotype of a 'mammy' is demolished when Morrison chooses to narrate Pauline's responses to complex life situations, refuting the image of a mammy.

The choice of Claudia as narrator of the scene of Pauline beating Pecola for spilling clobber in the white employer's kitchen is significant. It completely absents Pecola from the experience. Yet, a shift of the narrative at this crucial point is important for constructing views about Pauline and is therefore strategic. The narrative draws Pauline's life alternately in authorial voice and a first person account. What is achieved by a parallel narrative movement into Pauline's consciousness is a deeper understanding of her situation. The italicised sections

showing Pauline's long, evocative musings and reflections give another side to the image of the typical mammy. The shifts show that Pauline too has been subjected to a sense of emotional deprivation and dejection and has undergone the experience of being a victim of insensitivity<sup>13</sup>. Pauline's sense of inadequacy shows that Pecola has inherited this sense of low self esteem. So, perhaps Morrison is seeing the responsibility of Pauline and Cholly in inculcating a low sense of self worth.

But, it has to be seen that the desire for 'blue eyes' though emerging at the moment of her parents' quarrel is located within her consciousness. After her rape this sense of loneliness is compounded into a state of schizophrenic split consciousness. The talk within her split self accentuates Pecola's isolation from the world in all senses of the term.

The specificity of Pecola's response is borne out by the contrast with Claudia's response to a similar experiential situation. Claudia's responses to Shirley Temple dolls and Mary Jane candies are different from those of Pecola. Rendered in the first person narrative the rejection of Shirley Temple dolls by Claudia is intended to serve as a pointer to the ways parents create or destroy self-esteem in their children. And yet, victimization of Pauline and Cholly shows Morrison's refusal to see Pecola's condition as primarily the consequence of parental

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<sup>13</sup>Wade-Gayles, Gloria. "The Halo and the Hardships : Black Women as Mothers and Sometimes as Wives". **No Crystal Stair : Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction**. New York : The Pilgrims Press, 1984. 57-113. Gayles essay provides the feminist perspective on black women as mothers and the consequence of sexism and racism on relationships with their daughters.

injustices. To plumb the complex depths of Pecola's individuality Morrison tries to get to the core of her responses which show that there is something in her which accentuates her passivity. This is the reason that after her rape an inside view of her consciousness is available only through a talk about her 'blue eyes' within her own split self. The need to interact is present but the absence of support structures around her and also an individual kind of passivity limit Pecola's expression of her self.

The presence of individualised responses is seen by Morrison as an evidence of the complexity within the experience. The contrast in responses of Claudia and Pecola to Maureen Peal is rendered through Claudia's consciousness. The impact of such a strategy is to show Pecola's passivity and also indicate that the cause is present in something intrinsic and not only her parents. The narration of significant moments through the consciousness not of the victim is intended to highlight her passivity. Yet, at the same time Morrison wants to show that the absence of connections is not only for Pecola but for others too. This is perhaps the reason that no member of Breedlove family comes to know of the sense of isolation present in each other. Pecola's first utterance in the novel 'How do you get somebody to love you" (TBE; 29), comes after her initiation into womanhood with menses. But, the tragic-comic dimensions of the discovery not only highlight Pecola's isolation. They are also a pathetic reality in the light of Pecola's subsequent rape by her father. Yet, the narrative shows that the desire to be loved and the fear of being rejected

are not specific to Pecola but to Pauline and Cholly too.

The reality of this absence of connections is introduced by Claudia at the beginning. At the end too, Claudia recalls with despair the wasting of Pecola. The cursory manner in which other people's reputation is demolished at the beginning is not very different from the touch of denigrating finality expressed by the women over the queer lot of Breedloves at the end of the novel. Morrison is interested to show here the difficulty and the inadequacy of expecting an experience to be easily explainable, unifiably defined. As long as people talk about people and get into relationships, responses and reputations would be in a constant state of flux. What was at the beginning is also present at the end of the novel but there is no change in the perceptions of people.

Morrison is indicating that each individual is engaged in a complex cycle of relationships. It is just not possible to lay threadbare the complexity of each individual's experience because each is responding from an individual perception. It is not adequate to see the experience of a black woman in monolithic terms because perceptions and responses are never static. Also, the presence of broken centres in relationships in the novel has shown the inadequacy of assuming that one knows completely about another individual's life. The shifts in narrative voices are strategised by Morrison to show that even the narrator is not beyond prejudices or self assertive statements - Claudia's aggressive monologue on Shirley Temple dolls and Mary Jane candies. Also, the shifts are created to show that the one who endures a marked

form of violence is not the only victim. The lives of Cholly, Pauline and Sam are also marked by violence of another kind. In trying to show the possibility of the oppressor also being an oppressed at some point in the experience Morrison develops to the full an idea which is thwarted by Walker in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Somehow, in the need to show black woman as always the victim and black male as always the oppressor<sup>14</sup>, Walker overlooks individual experiential dimensions. Consequently, the need is to highlight the significance of Grange's 'Third Life' and his recognition that "to survive whole was what he wanted for Ruth" (TTL of GC, 214). Walker is impelled to cast Brownfield in stark shades of a victimiser. The shifts in narrative voices are engaged for different purposes in the earlier and the latter part of the novel. As a result shifts in voices which make Brownfield a victim at first are strategised to show him as a victimiser later. Consequently, the horrifying change in Brownfield does not grow naturally out of his perceptions. It is imposed for the purpose of portraying Mem and Margaret as victims.

Morrison's refusal to see only the black woman as the victim compels her to use narrative strategies which highlight ambivalence in an experience generally marked by overt sociological judgments on the beastly character of a black man and the tragic life of a black woman<sup>15</sup>. Morrison resists the need to

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<sup>14</sup>Hogue, W. "History, The Feminist Discourse and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*". *MELUS*. 12 (Summer 1985). 45-62.

<sup>15</sup>Bakerman, Jane S. "Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the novels of Toni Morrison". *American Literature*. 52, No.4 (1981). 541-563.

simplify consequences in *The Bluest Eye* on the absence of connections as creations of only a gender conflict. Morrison instead provides an insight into the complex nature of black woman's experience which establishes her humanity perhaps more basically and totally than is possible in Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copland*.

self recreation is seen by the black feminist literary critics as ~~an~~ evidence of the feminist orientation of these writers. The broader symbolic possibilities in the portrayal of an individual's isolation and her struggle for selfhood within a community are convincingly elicited through a universalist perspective towards Afro-American women's experience. A universalist sees the struggle of a black female not as primarily the result of sexual and racial exploitation. The struggle is seen as an expression of a perennial, a more universal need for self realisation.

Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* (1974) and Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982) are analysed in this chapter to compare the nature of both writers' perceptions on the black woman's experience as an outcast in the community. The underlying effort in both the novels, as the analysis will show, is to highlight the inadequacy of categories like outsider/insider, innocent/guilty, pure/pariah or good/evil. Yet it is the individual world view of the writer that creates different points of emphasis. A crucial feature of the novels is the relationship between women, who are branded as outcasts, and their community. The exploration of the relationship is relevant to a questioning of categories because it is in relation to the community that individuals are branded as outcasts, as pariahs.

## II

The nature of an individual's relationship with the community has been at the centre of Afro-American women's writings. Fiction by Afro-American women writers has been concerned to draw out the different configurations of a black woman's relationship with her

community. Nineteenth century Afro-American women writers portrayed black woman's experiential dilemma through the figure of a mulatto. The tragic element inlaid into a mulatto's experience was engaged to represent symbolically the crisis of identity and struggle for selfhood. As one who existed on the fringes of 'white' and 'black' community the mulatto represented for the writer a symbol of the community's ostracization of an individual on the basis of race and gender.

Nevertheless, in works like *Iola Leroy* or *Shadows Uplifted* (1892) or *Passing* (1929) the black woman as 'tragic mulatto' though shown as an outcast actually struggled either to prove her credentials or to ensure an entry into the black community. Iola Leroy's experience as a mulatto and recognition of her self as a different presence is aimed to finally address the race problem. Iola Leroy attains self realisation and thrives on feelings of pride about her black lineage. Her rejection of white values is the starting of her journey to selfhood. Iola Leroy's decision is proved correct through substantial authorial directives in the narrative which emphasise that black men and women needed to integrate with their community and also struggle for spiritual and moral resurrection of the community in the aftermath of slavery and American Civil war.

As in *Iola Leroy*, the black community in Nella Larsen's *Passing* is shown to be conspicuously innocent of any tendency to cast individuals as 'pariahs'. In fact, it is the mulatto female, 'passing' as a white, who is shown in an emotional turmoil for having betrayed her community. The black community in novels like



*Passing* is shown as a stolid structure, an alternative better than a mulatto 'passing' off as a white. The black community is described in glowing terms, one which is waiting for the errant children to return to its fold. The novel finally shows the doom of those who resolve their individual experiential crisis by wilfully rejecting the black community. The evidence of psychological exploitation of a mulatto's experiential state in the novel is not able to develop sufficiently, as the authorial voice in the narrative adopts a moralistic attitude towards the female outcast. The black community in the novels of passing was shown to be in a pure and in an insular state, one which was uncorrupted and hence ideal for the moral well being of an errant community member.

It was Zora Neale Hurston who broke free from the prevailing literary tradition of creating the black community as insular and pure. Her novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) questioned not only the norms of white society but those of the black community as well. The experience in the novel showed in depth the potential within the black community also to create pariah figures. It is this questioning of the black community, its norms and values as they impinge on the lives of black men and women, that characterizes the enduring quality of Hurston's fiction and makes her also a significant predecessor to contemporary

Afro-American women writers<sup>1</sup>.

### III

Alice Walker and Toni Morrison too like Hurston see the figure of the female outcast in positive configurations. In fact, both novelists emphasise in their novels the significance of the outcast figure to the community since an outcast serves as a symbol for questioning the society's attitude to fit individuals in slots of good/bad and pure/pariah. In Alice Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* and Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* the figure of the black woman as an outcast is cast in the shade of an ancestral presence. It is these ancestral presences who initiate the quest for selfhood in the black male protagonists and in the process ascertain for them a more meaningful way of living. There is evidently a feeling of rapport between the questors and the female ancestral but 'outcast' presences in these novels. A sense of empathy between the so-called 'outcast' and the safely ensconced 'insider' who is shown as a victim is a characteristic feature of these novels. In Morrison's novel *Sula* and Walker's novel *The Color Purple* both novelists explore this empathy in terms of friendship between two women, one an outcast, flouting the norms of the community, another an insider, living within the

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<sup>1</sup>Articles appear exploring the line of continuity between Zora Neale Hurston and contemporary Afro-American women writers. See, "Revision as Collaboration : Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* as source for Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" by Geraldine Smith Wright in *SAGE*. 4(Fall, 1983). 20-25; "The Color Purple : A Spiritual Descendent of Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* by Jane Davis in *Grist* 6 (Summer, 1987). 79-96; "Concepts of selfhood in *Their Eyes were Watching God* and *The Color Purple*" by Sandra Alps in *Pacific Review*. 4 (Spring, 1986). 106-112.

permitted norms of her community. Yet, the difference in the writers' individual perceptions towards the experiences influences the portrayal of the outcast figure<sup>2</sup>.

Toni Morrison's concern in *Sula* is to explore the different dimensions of Sula's friendship with Nel and through the vicissitudes of their relationship show that finally the definitions of outcast/pariah/bad applied for Sula are as much of constructs as the labels of insider/pure/good used for Nel. These constructs, the novel shows, prevent recognition of contradictory impulses in an individual and give rise to the need for stereotypes about those who are not like one's own self. Morrison, in *Sula*, shows more significantly the mutuality of existence, that Nel and Sula finally may not be opposites but different parts of the same self. This recognition proves the actual inadequacy of labelling Sula as a sinner and Nel as innocent.

Walker's concern in *The Color Purple* is also to show the significance of the female outcast for the community. But, unlike *Sula* the significance of the outcast in *The Color Purple* is seen in relation to the changes created by her presence in black men and women inside the community. The change is towards the gradual recognition by black men of their responsibility for the victimization of black women. The black woman who is the victim inside the community attains selfhood through interaction with

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<sup>2</sup>Gayles-Wade, Gloria. "Journeying from 'Can't to can' and Sometimes Back to 'Can't': Black women of challenge and contradiction". **No Crystal Stair : Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction**. New York : Pilgrim Press, 1984. 184-215.

another black female who is seen as an outcast<sup>3</sup>. The 'positive' aspect of the outcast's presence is the change initiated from the victim's earlier situation of passive acceptance to a state of questioning the norms of society. Unlike the novel *Sula*, the idea in *The Color Purple* is to show that female outcasts are essential for the task of changing existing social perceptions about black women. In *Sula* the concern is not to affirm the relevance of a female outcast to change social images but to show the inadequacy of seeing the condition of the outcast itself as static<sup>4</sup>. *Sula* shows the possibility that the insider who is seen as 'pure' can also possess an element in self which resembles the one present in an outsider. In fact, the novel highlights the final irrelevance of seeing an individual in relation to any label-whether 'outcast' or 'insider'.

The condition of being an outcast is shown as essential for initiating the process of self realisation. The change in Celie's condition - from victimization to selfhood - through the agency of Shug in *The Color Purple* is intended to show the redeeming aspect of an outcast. The novel conveys through the process of Celie's realisation of selfhood that a black woman like her has to become an outcast before she can actually realise the full possibilities of her self. Walker reverses the stereotype of the outcast as one

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<sup>3</sup>Harris, Trudier. "From Victimisation to Free Enterprise: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*". *Studies in American Fiction*. 14 (Spring, 1986). 1-17.

<sup>4</sup>Gayles-Wade, Gloria. "Giving Birth to Self : The Quests for wholeness of Sula Mae Peace and Meridian Hill". *Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction*. New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984. 184-215.

who is alienated from the community<sup>5</sup>. Far from being detached the outcast in Walker's novel activates the change in the insiders and sets in motion positive forces "for the survival and wholeness of the community" in "womanist" terms. Thus, the condition of being an outcast is seen as actually essential and affirmative in *The Color Purple*. The novel confirms that only an outcast can harness the powers of self actualisation in the females because only then the black males would recognise the nature and extent of their responsibility as victimisers.

In *Sula*, the emphasis is to show through Nel and Sula's friendship the presence of the forbidden element in Nel - the will to do or even enjoy the wrong done to others - an element assumed to be present only in Sula<sup>6</sup>. Morrison tries to show that selfhood is attained only when self deception is cleared. The shifts in narrative voices bring out the potential of culpability in Nel too. It becomes difficult, in the course of the experience to assign the label of 'pure' to Nel and 'pariah' to Sula. The presence of Sula is essential for self realisation of Nel but not quite in the same way as Shug's presence is for Celie in *The Color Purple*. Sula's relationship with Nel highlights the contradictory and self deceiving nature of even the notion of pure or pariah in a community and therefore does not stop at showing only positive aspects of an experience.

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<sup>5</sup>Harris, Trudier. "On *The Color Purple*: Stereotypes and Silence." *Black American Literature Forum*. 18 (Winter 1984). 155-161.

<sup>6</sup>McDowell, Deborah E. "The Self and the Other: Reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Black Female Text". *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. ed. by Nellie McKay. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988. 77-89.

Sula tells Nel, "How do you know? May be it wasn't you. May be I was good. Not you" (S, 146)<sup>7</sup>. The point at which this statement is made is appalling to Nel as well as to the reader. Nel along with the entire community felt that Sula was wrong in making love to Nel's husband, Jude, which caused their subsequent separation. Sula sees nothing wrong in it since they are "good friends" and earns the label of a "pariah" for cruelty to Nel, the one who was good to everyone. Nel cannot comprehend the reasons because "I was good to you" (S, 144).

The shift into Nel's consciousness immediately before Sula's questioning of 'who was right and who was wrong' brings out the complex duplicity of Nel's motives. The shift illustrates that an individual seen as virtuous and pure is also capable of harbouring calculative ill will. The shift into Nel's consciousness shows the toll taken on her by "virtue", which as the omniscient narrator indicates had been "her only mooring" (S, 139). It is strategic that the omniscient narrator conveys Nel's emotional duplicity even as she comes to inquire about an ailing Sula, doing her own bit of good to the 'whore'. In showing Nel's emotional dichotomy Morrison shows that a person who lives the life of an image created by the community - whether of good or bad - is thwarted from fuller self realisation. It is to highlight the unacknowledged side of her self that an inside view of Nel is given at this point in the narrative.

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<sup>7</sup>All references to *Sula* (1974) pertain to the Knopf edition (1974) and are parenthetically given in the text, using the abbreviation S.

There's a touch of irony in Sula's analysis of Nel after her departure to get the medicine, "Nel always thrived on a crisis..... Nel was the best" (S, 141). The irony present is that an earlier shift into Nel's consciousness conveys her state of mind, "she had practised not just the words, but the tone, the pitch of her voice. It should be calm, matter-of-fact, but strong in sympathy - for the illness though, not for the patient. The sound of her voice as she heard it betrayed no curiosity, no pride, just the inflection of any good woman come to see a sick person who, incidentally had such visits from nobody else" (S, 138).

The hypocrisy innate in the veneer of a wronged wife as well as the disarming candour of the whore is drawn sharply at this point in the narrative. More important is Sula's statement at this point, "Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don't get nothing for it" (S, 144-145). The central concern of the novel is drawn to a climax here stressing that ambivalence is at the heart of every desire, motive and action. At the beginning of the scene of visit to Sula the omniscient voice informs the 'syrupy' nature of Nel's love for her children but they had all moved beyond her horizons. In context of this statement the shift into Nel's consciousness gloating on the righteousness of her intentions to visit an ailing. Sula shows the contradiction at the basis of her statements and thoughts as well.

In Sula Morrison's narrative strategies highlight her complex perception of the black woman's situation as a pariah, an

experience given to easy categorisation. The cyclical nature of experience is brought out to show that beginnings prefigure endings even as endings emerge out of the beginnings. The cyclical perception of the outcast's experience takes the significance of Sula's presence beyond feminist principles. Morrison's concern is to show that Nel's inability to see beyond self conceived innocence arises out of the nature of her responses at the beginning. Perceived through the child Nel's eyes the 'foolish smile' (S, 22) passed by her mother Helene to the conductor on the trip to Cinnccinnati shapes her resolve never to turn into 'custard' (S, 22) in future. This need never to be caught off guard motivates Nel to take on the role of the do-gooder which prevents her from seeing her own culpability. In fact, Nel's moment of self realisation comes actually through Sula's grandmother, Eva. This strategy conveys Morrison's concern to show the unwarranted source of insights. These insights are not always given by the outcast because Morrison's aim is to show the complex nature of each individual, even the ones who have not outrightly rejected society.

In contrast the moment of Celie's realisation of selfhood is directly initiated by Shug. Celie says 'I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here". (TCP, 176)<sup>8</sup>. Shug's influence on Celie at this point is clear by the shift in voice, "Then I feel Shug shake me,

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<sup>8</sup>All references to *The Color Purple* (1982) pertain to the H. Brace Jovanovich edition (1982) and are given parenthetically in the text, using the abbreviation TCP.



Celie, she say. And I come to myself" (TCP, 176). This coming to myself' is followed by Celie's above stated assertion which creates a direct correlation between Celie's assertion of selfhood and, the outcast, Shug's gesture of encouragement.

Not only is this statement significant for espousing womanist ideals as manifested in the change in Celie. It is also significant because it is indicative of the point to which Celie's growth has moved. The statement divides the novel into two parts. The earlier part of the narrative shows the state of Celie's mind as a victim. She cannot fight but only wants 'to survive'.

The choice of the epistolary form of narration is natural to Celie's state of victimization. As one so 'shamed of her life, "not never tell nobody but God" (TCP, 3), Celie's only recourse is writing letters to God<sup>9</sup>. In its very nature this form of narration is autobiographical and isolated. The very act of writing letters shows that Celie feels alienated from her experience, from her community<sup>10</sup>. The community in her victimised condition means only oppressiveness of a step-father and her husband, Albert. The linear narrative structure highlights Walker's view that experience is not synchronic. In *The Color Purple* the linear structure embodies the perception that one can be only one kind of

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<sup>9</sup>The symbolic significance of the epistolary form of narration in *The Color Purple* is analysed by critics in articles like, "Don't Tell: Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*". *PMLA*, 103 (March, 1988). 162-174; "The Color Purple : Writing to Undo What Writing Has Done" by V. Boble in *Phylon*. 47, (June 1986). 107-116.

<sup>10</sup>Fifer, Elizabeth. "The Dialect and Letters of *The Color Purple*. *Contemporary American Women Writers : Narrative Strategies*. ed. by Catherine Rainwater and W.J. Scheick. Kentucky : University Press of Kentucky, 1988. 165-188.

person at one point of time. Initially Celie is shown to be different from Shug. She is victim of rape and abuse. It is only through Shug that Celie gathers the courage to assert, "But I'm here".

Walker's concern like Morrison's is to show through the 'outcast' the presence of 'oppressor' in the insider. But, Celie's growth to selfhood does not involve recognition of the element of 'others' in her self. What is done instead is evidence of the changed response of Celie to other women after she asserts her self. The implication is that Celie becomes supportive towards other women because she has moved beyond passive acceptance of victimization. Yet, the change in the attitude as a natural outcome of something intrinsic to Celie is not fully developed to show the complexity of Celie's individuality. The linear progression of experience places Celie's response as a victim at one end of the narrative and can be contrasted with her rebellions, assertive responses on similar situations only after Shug's arrival in her life.

The difference is marked out by her response to another woman before and after the coming of Shug. Albert's son Harpo wants to know 'what to do to make Sofia mind' (TCP, 34) and Celie replies "beat her, I say" (TCP, 35). Walker wants to show how a victim may not actually be sympathetic towards another victim. The alternative to such a situation is to move beyond the circle of victimization. The narrative at this point shifts into Celie's consciousness to build up this concern. Celie thinks, "I like Sofia but she doesn't act me at all.... And like she pity me"

(TCP, 34). The shift into Celie's consciousness shows that her response to Sofia is determined by a belief that somehow Sofia pities her.

Celie's responses highlight Walker's concern that it is because of her own victimization inflicted by a male that Celie cannot relinquish elements of oppressiveness within her. It is only after interaction with Shug that Celie becomes alive to the needs of her self. Walker shows that the change in Celie is the outcome of interaction with Shug, the outcast. This strengthens her argument in the novel that, first, a female victim needs to rise against male oppressors and the patriarchal, socially approved norms of living. Secondly, the novel confirms the necessity of a female outcast figure who can actually initiate and support the female victim inside the community to struggle for self realisation.

The nature of change in Celie after friendship with Shug is in terms of attitude towards males in the community. The evidence is in Celie's immediate expression of support for Sofia after she is arrested. It is only after she receives the perspective of Shug that Celie recognises what was missing from her life. She realises the nature of her own needs. With the fulfilment of these needs, no longer thwarted by submission to male control, Celie does not feel the need to victimise any one else. In fact, she rises to support other black females in their condition as victims.

The change is not only in Celie but in Albert as well. This emphasises Walker's concern to show the impact of the female

outcast's presence not only on women but on men as well. The shift in narrative voices shows how the presence of Shug, instead of destroying, actually creates a different kind of bond in Celie and Albert's relationship. "Mr..... look up at me, our eyes meet. This the closest us ever felt" (TCP, 50). The significance of this first person response from Celie is to be seen in context of the overruling comment by Albert's father to Shug, "Celie, he say, you have my sympathy. Not many women let they husband's whore lay up in the house" (TCP, 50). The irony inlaid into the scene is that the moment of someone stating the community's view of Shug's stay at Celie's place is the moment when both Celie and Albert are really kindred spirits. This emphasises the change brought in each one due to Shug. The pathetic inadequacy of judgements about the outcast is also underscored through the first person narrative technique. It manages to highlight that perhaps for each one the nature of significance of the outcast is different.

The different ways in which an outcast figure influences the lives of ones who are inside the enviable social circle is also the concern of *Sula*. But, unlike *The Color Purple*, the emphasis in *Sula* is on highlighting the individual response to the outcast as a sign of the complexity of experience. It is not to suggest the necessity of a female outcast for initiating change in the victim who is inside community and thereby stopping the cycle of oppression. The emphasis in *Sula* is to show that perhaps the sense of awareness in an outcast is also not complete. The concern in *Sula* is not to create, as in *The Color Purple*, the

outcast's situation to be more enviable by making it an essential condition for self realisation. Contrastively, in *Sula*, the significance is seen more in terms of the inadequacy of holding any position as better than the other, whether that of the pariah, the outcast or the insider, the social do gooder because nothing is static - neither people nor perceptions. Every thing is in a state of flux because perspectives do not remain the same.

To put forward this view Morrison creates relationships of Nel and Sula within a larger experiential cycle. Shadrack's instituting of the National Suicide Day is part of his plan for "making a place for fear" (S, 14) in life. Shadrack's presence is significant not because he is integral to the folklore woven around the National Suicide Day. Shadrack's presence is important to highlight the unforeseen lines of connection between the pure and the pariah.

Shadrack is explicitly outside the community. He is the real outcast. But, there are connections between him and Sula. National Suicide Day is flaunted by him as a conspicuous warning to people for living in a state of delusion about themselves. Like him, but from a different experiential situation, Sula is present to show that one who is seen as a pariah is not alone in her guilt, the insider who claims to be pure is also part of it. Shadrack's one utterance "always" is connected to the crux of the experiential situation here. The idea is that perhaps it is not only Nel or Sula at times but 'always' that each individual sees the experience from his or her own point of view not recognising the validity of the other's perception.

When Shadrack says 'always' it is significant because it refers also to Nel's implicit guilt in having watched the boy, Chicken Little drown. Nel and Shadrack at the end of the novel are shown moving in opposite directions which is to say the extreme ends, that never ever come together. Sula is the link between them, one who was neither completely outside nor inside the community. There are obvious connections between Shadrack and Sula because both are labelled as 'pariah' figures who represent evil. Yet, Morrison's concern is to show the links between Nel and Sula in order to show that there are connections between Nel and Shadrack as well. Even though both move in opposite directions as the novel ends, the focus is on showing that perhaps even within moments of connection between Nel and Sula, when each is equally guilty, there have to be moments for perceiving the place for fear and moments of no connection, when perhaps none can understand the validity of another's point of view. The shadow lines of connections between Shadrack and Nel make possible the culpability of the social conformist in relation to the social outcast. This connection is made at a point when Nel recognises her guilt.

Ironically, it is Eva who asks, 'tell me, how you killed that little boy'? (S, 168). Coming at a point, when Nel has started preening in complacency over her righteousness, a question like this shows a possible unpalatable side of her as well. Nel cannot accept that "she is guilty" because it was Sula who actually drowned the boy. It is not so for Eva who saw Sula watching her mother burn, since having watched passively is equivalent by her

of actually perpetrating the accident. The shift into Nel's consciousness at that point is strategic to convey that Nel also experienced 'joyful stimulation' (S, 170) when Chicken Little was inadvertently swung by Sula into water. She recalls, the conversation immediately after the accident,

"Shouldn't we tell?" (Sula)

"Did he see us?" (Nel)

"I don't know. No" (Sula)

"Let's go, we can't bring him back" (Nel) (S, 170)

This conversation described at this point in the narrative is the most damning evidence of Nel's culpability. It turns upside down for the reader all earlier views of Sula as the only one who was a 'pariah'. If having 'watched' passively is participation then Nel is also guilty. If she is, then who is she to brand Sula as the one who was in the wrong. The dialogical narration of an incident that happened years back is revealed at the end after Eva's accusation that Nel too was guilty. This revelation reverses not only the stereotype of seeing the one who is different either in awe or with rejection. It also demolishes the very basis of forming perceptions which disregard the otherness of one's own self.

Inlaid into this realisation of Nel is the illustration of the idea that experience is synchronic. Nel's potential for culpability is conveyed even at the beginning which showed that the experience even at that point had germinating evidences to show the interchangeability. The aim of the revelation which comes at the end, and its link with the incident of visit to Eva

and seeing Shadrack on the way back, is actually to show that possibly Nel was always like Sula and Sula was 'always' like Nel. This highlights the view that outcasts and insiders are not at different ends in the journey of self realisation.

The elements supposedly opposed to each other are therefore seen as simultaneously present in an individual. When Nel resolved 'never to turn into custard' on the train to Cinnacinnati as a child, that moment became part of her entire outlook. She was unable to accept the reality of the 'joyful stimulation' in her on seeing Chicken Little drown. Nel's question to herself and to the reader "why didn't I feel bad when it happened? How come it felt good to let him fall" (S, 170) is answered in her resolve made many years before on the train. At that moment Nel had perhaps closed the door of self appraisal, and begun to live with the image created by society. As a consequence self deception prevented Nel from recognising the not so virtuous element within her.

Even as Nel is shown to have imbibed the complex sense of selfhood so too Sula's consistent desire to 'experiment' with her 'life' (S, 118) grew out of a feeling that she had "no center around which to grow" (S, 119). It is this absence of selfhood in Sula which sees the act of involvement with Jude as nothing more than having 'fucked' (S, 145). Morrison's portrayal of Sula's reactions to Ajax shows that it is difficult to anticipate one's own reactions in an experience. Interestingly, the change in Sula's responses to Ajax is processed through his consciousness. He sees the "green ribbons in Sula's hair and the "table laid" and



"detects the sound of the nest" (S, 133). For what could be very natural part of Sula's self, Ajax has only 'momentary regret' (S, 133) before leaving. But moving into Ajax's consciousness at this point is Morrison's strategy to convey the inadequacy of people's response to the change in her because they have a certain image of her. The shift into Ajax's consciousness shows that possibly he too sees her only in one aspect.

It is through Eva's pointer that Nel recognises within her too the presence of a culpable self. By showing Sula's responses to Ajax, Morrison conveys the difficulty of making judgements about another. Morrison shows that realisation of selfhood for Nel through Sula is essential because in a fundamental sense they are part of each other.

Celie through Shug imbibes gradually the feelings and attitudes that make her a womanist who finds worth even in the purple color - one which is not regarded as beautiful in the conventional sense. In seeing worth in not so often flaunted colour Celie shows sympathy for relating to one whose condition is socially unenviable like hers. Celie motivates herself to use her anger creatively, "a needle, and not razor in my hand, I think" (TCP, 125). The change initiated in Celie, the victim, through Shug, the outcast, is made significant finally in the change in males as well. Albert asks Celie, 'you don't like me cause I'm a man?' (TCP, 214). Celie's control of her situation is complete in her subsequent resistance to the control of males. The idea underscored is that the outcast's presence is crucial to change a woman's self perception and the attitude of males towards women as

well.

In *Sula* Morrison's concern is not to show the unassailable cruciality of an outcast's presence. The concern is more to highlight the nature of reactions set in motion due to a different presence. In seeing her as repository of one pattern of response, the community ignores, first, the possible presence of similar response in others as well. Also, such a view sees the outcast to be capable of only one kind of response which is not amenable to change. *Sula* emphasises the possibility of change in the outcast showing also the inadequacy of seeing Sula as the only one possessing this element of difference. Nel's self ignorance is in a way an indication of Morrison's grasp of the complex nature of experience. It is possible that Nel's self deception about her own innocence is after a point not very different from Sula's rebellious attitude to the 'evil' within her. Both are essential for each other.

*The Color Purple* is similar to *Sula* in the portrayal of the outcast on this account. Walker draws Shug as one who in her rejection of social norms has perhaps been indifferent to the ones like Albert's first wife. Gradually Shug recognises the nature of her own responsibility. However the novel stresses that women who are insiders are invariably victimised. The emphasis is that the outsider is also capable of change in perceptions. The point of difference from *Sula* is that Walker draws clear lines of the kind of perceptions which initiate the necessary changes in the victim whereas Morrison shows the difficulty of a clear cut recognition of motives of another for the purpose of self exploration of

nature of experiences. Morrison unlike Walker shows that perhaps any final way to convey the separateness of the outsider and insider impossible because the moments of insight are as ambiguous as the experience itself.

The outcast figure in *Sula* is not a static symbol because the experience is in a flux. So, what could at one point be seen as outside the community's experience becomes at another point a presence inside the social setup. The lines separating the point of breaking away and the point of movement inside the circle are ever changing. It becomes difficult, therefore to mark the point in *Sula* when the 'good' becomes 'bad' or the 'bad' becomes like 'good'. In *The Color Purple* there are definitely marked moments of Celie's transition to a womanist like Shug, even at the cost of becoming an outcast. The ambivalences in the pariah's experience are drawn with perhaps greater depth and complexity in *Sula* in contrast to *The Color Purple*.

## CHAPTER IV

### IMAGES OF WIVES : THE (UN)SETTLED MARRIAGE

Feminist ideology sees marriage as another institution created by society for oppressing women. The underlying power structure of social institutions is perceived by feminists as an organised way to deprive women of their identity. For a feminist marriage deprives women of the power to choose. The state of matrimony reveals to the feminist the ruinous influence of unequal distribution of power between men and women.

The racial as well as sexual dimensions of female oppression within the matrimonial situation are questioned by black feminists. A black woman's negotiation of selfhood is seen by black feminists as dependent not only on the patriarchal set up within the black community but also on the indirect or direct implications of a racist social structure.

A central concern of Afro-American women's writings has also been to explore the nature of a black woman's experience of matrimony. The aim of writers is to provide an alternative perception on the experience of matrimony for a 'black woman'. The writers in varying capacities explore the nature of the matrimonial experience which is complicated not only by the dominating position held by black males within the community but also due to the interpretations by the white society about black community. A reexamination of the black woman's experience of matrimony has meant reexamining the stereotypes perpetuated about the experience within the community and outside the community.

The black woman is seen by the community as an 'emasculating matriarch', one who has deprived the black male of his manhood

forcing him to flee from filial responsibilities. The black woman's image of a faithful employee to the whites - an enduring 'mammy' figure glowing with maternity - and the consequent impact on relationships is regarded as the cause for matrimonial conflicts amongst black men and women. The twin workings of racism and sexism, according to black feminists, create images of black woman which perpetuate her oppression within marriage.

The universalist view of experience differs from the 'race' or 'gender' oriented perceptions of matrimony. Unlike feminists who see marriage as a social institution, the universalist view emphasises that the social aspect of matrimony has a conspicuously human face which is to be accounted for, as it involves finally two human beings. Therefore, to a universalist, unless and until the individual element of the experience is understood it may not be possible to fully explain the adequacy or inadequacy of a social institution.

The concern of a universalist perspective is to highlight the individual complexity of not only the wife's responses to a shared experience but the husband's too. The question most crucial to the universalist is individual responses to the matrimonial situation. Unlike the feminists' view, a universalist perspective refrains from seeing gender as the sole determinant of individual motives and responses. It is possible that the emotional configuration of individual responses is influenced to an extent by the factors of race and gender. Nevertheless, beneath the specificity lies the fundamental maxim that human beings are constantly evolving and shaping their responses to experience. Whatever may be the experiential specificity in a marriage, what

is unquestionable is the presence of individuals who are in their humanity reposed with ambivalence. It is this element of human ambivalence which is emphasised by universalists but which is overlooked by feminists in their concern to highlight the humanity exclusively of females. But, the humanity of a female can not be defined in exclusion or rejection of the humanity of those not part of the group and the universalist perspective here helps to perceive the humanity of others as well.

Alice Walker in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and Toni Morrison in *Jazz* (1992) try to recreate the complexity inherent in a black woman's experience of matrimony into a viable aesthetic representation. These novels provide alternative perceptions on an experience that has more often been cast within prevailing stereotypes. Walker and Morrison in their novels explore the unsettled aspects of marriage and show the possibility of complexity even in an experience perceived as completely unchanging and one dimensional.

In *Jazz* and *The Temple of My Familiar* the writers are examining the nature of a black woman's experience of matrimony. Both reject the notion of seeing marriage as a static institution. They share the view that since individuals are part of the institution of matrimony, it cannot remain unaffected by their responses.

## II

The experience of matrimony has been the subject of Afro-American women writers from the beginning of the Afro-American women's literary tradition, even though, the delineation of woman's role of wife was more often seen within

racial stereotypes which idealised her condition.

It was Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) written at the peak of Harlem Renaissance which demolished stereotyped perceptions about black woman's experience of matrimony. Rendering the experience of a black woman's quest for identity was not a novel idea. But, what was novel were the insights that Hurston brought to Janie's quest for identity. Janie's struggle for selfhood is carried out within the assumedly settled condition of matrimony. What is of significance is that Hurston, placed within the Harlem movement characterised by the 'Black is Beautiful' maxim, shows the authenticity of Janie's quest through her representation of duplicity not only in the culture of the whites but that of the black community as well.

Janie rejects the white community's prescribed role for a black woman as 'de mule uh de world'<sup>1</sup> (TEWWG, 28). The notion of respectability cherished by the black community for marriage is also shown as inadequate for Janie's quest. She does not want to be 'made to sit on defront porch' (TEWWG:49) and so flouts the black community's norms for its women. The novel is significant for its response to the black woman's experience and the struggle for selfhood in the midst of stereotypes existing in the black community itself.

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<sup>1</sup>All references to *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) pertain to the Negro Universities Press (1969) edition and are given parenthetically in the text abbreviated as TEWWG.

Rejecting the 'sobbing school of Negrohood',<sup>2</sup> Hurston created an experience in which there were no one dimensional images of the black community as only good, and the whites as only bad. In fact, Hurston's concern was to specifically question the hypocrisy present within the black community. In Janie's experience Hurston explored the presence of duplicity even within the community. She questioned the notion of marriage as an enviable position for black women, emphasizing that "marriage did not make love" (TEWWG, 44). The most important dream of black women like Janie's Nanny had been to be a rich black man's wife. It was indeed a welcome change to lord over someone than to be lorded over.

In exploring the nature of Janie's matrimonial experience Hurston questions the accepted notions of matrimony as the state of security and settlement. Hurston focuses actually on the process of the transition of Janie from ignorance to selfhood. Janie's sense of incompleteness in her first two marriages points out to the possibility of the unsettled nature of matrimony. Janie's spiritual journey within the matrimonial state is drawn in imagery that moves the experience beyond a black woman's quest. In fact Janie's quest for selfhood grows into a significant metaphor for the quest of an individual trying to create a sense of self from within the network of values imposed by others.

These insights are made available to the reader because Hurston employs a narrative mode which most convincingly highlights the nature of Janie's experience. Hurston uses the

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<sup>2</sup>Hurston, Zora Neale. *"How it feels to be colored Me"*. I love Myself : A Zora Neale Hurston Reader. ed. Alice Walker. New York : The Feminist Press, 1979. 153.



mode of communal storytelling - with Janie telling her friend Phoeby about her journey towards selfhood. The mode of narration is at once personal and creates immediacy of response. Also, the mode of communal story telling by its very orality has the quality of flexibility. It can be told and reshaped. Thus, it becomes the story of each woman who struggles to create a composite self from within the citadels of society whose dictates relentlessly fragment her efforts. In its retelling quality the communal mode of narration was identifiable with the basically oral narrative tradition of the black community and implied a rejection of the literary models of whites.

The narrative also uses Black Dialect interspersed with usage of Standard English. Janie's movement is between two worlds and Hurston highlights the responsive variations to experience through the usage of black dialect by the black community and Standard English by Janie's bourgeois oriented second husband, Joe Starks. In fact, Hurston saw language as a 'currency' which was being shaped and remade anew at every moment. This is seen in her narrative techniques and linguistic experimentation in *Their Eyes were Watching God*. Hurston's innovative narrative mode and linguistic experiments were part of her overall effort to somehow translate into the medium her perception of complexity even within matrimony, an experience frequently visualized in stereotyped terms. Hurston uses narrative strategies that successfully recreate the ambivalent nature of matrimonial experience.

Alice Walker and Toni Morrison also explore the nature of the married woman's predicament in their novels. Their fiction questions the general assumptions associated with the state of

matrimony. Both the writers test the viability of the notion that marriage means settlement and end of struggles as well as uncertainties for men and women. It is possible, their novels show, that a situation, seen to be, the most time tested manifestation of permanence, actually turns into a site for insecurity and inner chaos. Walker and Morrison, in their novels, create experiential responses of ostensibly stable situations which actually become pointers of the emotional upheaval ahead.

*Sula*, a novel by Morrison, shows that the beginning of matrimony is not the end of emotional insecurity for Nel. Contrary to her view, marriage to Jude, in the right way, at the right age does not ensure emotional security. In fact, "right in the middle of their laughing together", Sula according to Nel, took away her husband. The precise moment where Nel feels everything is all right becomes the moment when her 'secure marriage' crumbles, all because of her most dear childhood friend Sula. The rightness or the wrongness of Sula's act is to be seen in the context of the image of the martyred and wronged wife lived with by Nel. More significant is Morrison's questioning whether the image of a 'wronged wife' or a 'burdened mother' or 'the ideal daughter' were not perhaps variations of a basic self deception that prevented a clearer insight into the culpable potential of one's ownself. Nel cannot conceive of herself as capable of doing wrong and that is her undoing.

The crisis is heightened further due to her idealized notions of matrimony. So, when her marriage breaks Nel attaches herself to an idealized model of motherhood. Nel's response to the experience of motherhood is affected by her inner crisis and a

self deceptive feeling of innocence. Nel cannot recognise until the end, that perhaps in passively willing harm to Chicken Little she was more guilty than Sula at whose hands the boy actually drowned. Her resolve never to be caught doing wrong had also created in her the desire to be an ideal wife and mother. In doing so she had given up possibility of a forthright acceptance of her own potential for complex responses. In living up to the image of an ideal wife Nel came close to living in a state of self deception.

Morrison's concern is to dispel the notion of marriage as an idealised state of bliss. Morrison extends her exploration in *Tar Baby* into the domains of the marital experience of a white couple as well. The state of Margaret and Valerian's marriage is explored to serve as reminders for the relationship of the black couple, Son and Jadine, broadening the complex nature of the experience of matrimony beyond the colour line.

The novelist highlights the parallels between whites and blacks when it comes to responding to relationships. The colour line actually becomes a shadow line when it comes to the nature of individual responses to experience because self deception does not choose a colour. It comes in all shades of emotions. It is not the question of black or white, male or female. Anyone going into a relationship with preconceived notions is bound to be disappointed.

In Valerian, Margaret hoped for an end to the unhappy life with her parents and also end of her loneliness. In treating one relationship as a substitute for another, Margaret ends up with greater loneliness. Marriage does give her security but not

emotional fulfilment. Margaret had not been prepared that Valerian could also be coming into marriage with his own expectations. The state of their marriage is an evidence of what happens when the idea of individual responsibility is not seen as integral to a marriage.

Mapping out the emotional states of Valerian and Margaret, the reasons for their marriage, the retarded growth of their relationship gives ample evidence that Margaret is not the only one who is guilty. Her act of sticking pins into her infant son, Michael, shows the extent of her desperation for some kind of response - however deplorable and pitiable it would be, in the form of a wailing child. Valerian and Margaret's marriage is an evidence that all lives, remotely or closely connected, in an experiential situation are affected by the crisis in a marriage. The crisis grows out of the desire to change the partner into a more acceptable image of one's self. Son and Jadine's relationship also flounders because of their desire to change the other person into a more amenable version of one's own self. Perhaps the question raised through Son and Jadine about who is the real black man or who is the real black woman emerges out of a similar basic assumption. Son and Jadine see in each other elements which need to be changed in order for them to make a commitment.

Through Ruth's condition in the novel *Song of Solomon* Morrison is showing the impact on a life lived as per the norms of the society. Ruth is 'a small woman' "whose love is narrow but

deep(SOS, 134).<sup>3</sup> Gently but firmly directed towards Macon, an upcoming business man, by her father, Ruth is unable to develop a meaningful relationship with her husband. Since it was seen as imperative that she should marry, she is bound in matrimony to Macon. Marriage brought Ruth social status but diminished her sense of self esteem.

Deprived of any form of expression of affection Ruth is left only with the recourse of suckling her son even after he has outgrown the age to be nursed by her. The need is not practical but emotional. Ruth yearns to feel the 'thread of warmth' of feeling course through her in those furtively snatched moments. None can understand the nature of her need for some gesture of affection. She was married, she had children. Her life was complete as per the requirements of society. Yet, as the novel shows the feeling of incompleteness was so strong in Ruth that she had to make a weekly visit to her father's grave and lie over it for some kind of emotional fulfilment.

Ruth's emotional needs had narrowed down, either to a person, her son Milkman or her father; or even to a piece of furniture - the driftwood arrangement on the inner table or the watermark on it. These emotional outlets helped to give some meaning to her life. Marriage did not in any way help Ruth to flourish emotionally. Morrison does not focus only on the woman's condition in a loveless marriage. The focus is also on Ruth's husband Macon in order to emphasise the impact of a decadent

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<sup>3</sup>All references to *Song of Solomon* (1977) pertain to the Chatto and Windus edition (1978) and are given parenthetically in the text, abbreviated as SOS.

relationship on husband, wife and children. Macon sought emotional sustenance through the maxim "own things to own more things" (SOS, 55). Ruth too moved towards an avaricious love for particular objects of her affection.

The impact on children in a strife torn marriage is also recreated in Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. The focus on the absence of self esteem in Pecola is an example of the inability of Pauline and Cholly to extend any feeling of emotional well being to their daughter. Marriage from a state of bliss had turned into a 'crown of thorns' for Pauline and 'drunken forgetfulness' for Cholly. The unsettled state of the marriage bodes ill for the emotional health of the children.

It is precisely this concern which is underlined by Walker also in her novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The significance of Grange's experience is his realisation that his grandchild Ruth needed an environment better than what had been provided to her father, Grange's son Brownfield. Through Grange's awareness of his self in the 'third life' Walker conveys not only the victimization of women - physical and emotional - by their husbands but more the indirect emotional damage to the children. It is because of Grange's insensitivity in his first life that his wife Margaret commits suicide. The past repeats itself when Brownfield kills his wife Mem. Marriage had not led to any happiness either for Margaret or for Mem. The nature of Mem's victimization by Brownfield is drawn in detail to highlight the nature of oppressiveness for women within marriage.

Walker shows that marriage means oppression for women because black males thrash out their frustrations against whites on their

wives. Somehow, the feeling of powerlessness evident in their interaction with the whites, acquires violent dimensions in relation to black women. Walker points out that black males need to be responsible for their actions towards women and not attribute their violent behaviour only to the outrage felt on being subjected to racism by whites. Walker asserts the need for black males to reassess the source of their responses and recognise their responsibility for oppression of women.

In *The Color Purple* Walker through female friendship emphasises the inherently oppressive nature of marriage because it allows socially sanctioned exploitation of women by males. Walker here as in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* questions the nature of marriage as an enviable position for women. By making possible Celie's selfhood through friendship with Shug, an outcast, Walker questions the condition of marriage as an experience providing emotional wholeness for a woman.

Walker questions the black woman's experience of matrimony first by making the experience as actually a site for Celie's victimization. Secondly, by showing the change in Celie through Shug, Walker creates alternative possibilities for a woman beyond the socially sanctioned portals of marriage.

In fact, marriage in Walker's opinion may actually stand in the path of a woman's quest for self definition. It is this need to define herself which creates in Meridian a sense of dissatisfaction and emotional isolation in her marriage. For Walker nothing should stand in the way of an individual's quest for self definition. As Walker perceives, a black woman has, more than others, been deprived of this choice. In *Meridian*, as in

other novels Walker emphasises that self definition would be possible for the women not only by reexamining existing notions about what it means to be a black woman. It would also very crucially, in Walker's view, require realisation by the males the extent of their oppressive attitude. Meridian not only rejects marriage but also motherhood. In Meridian's rebellion Walker questions not only the conventional notions of marriage but motherhood as well.

Both Morrison and Walker are questioning the state of matrimony as it impinges on the inner life of a woman. Both see the much venerable institution as also capable of change since the individuals who are part of it are not monolithic but evolving, growing creatures. The need to be aware of self-culpability is the concern of both novelists. But, while Morrison extends this need of self awareness for everyone Walker specifically conveys the need for this awareness for a black male.

In *The Temple of My Familiar* also Walker shows the need for black males to recognise the humanity of black females. The oppression of a black female within marriage is seen to arise out of an absence of integration with the past of the community. When an individual breaks connections with the community then falsity of perceptions is created and a consequent crisis takes place in relationships. The matrimonial crisis is seen by Walker to be the consequence of an unawareness in the present social situation about the relevance of female based black community life that existed in ancient societies.

This chapter compares Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* with Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar*. The experiential



concerns of the novels focus on the situation of a crisis in marriage. As in their other novels, the writers here too are exploring the human face of an experiential situation generally explained in fixed terms. Even as a social institution supposedly possessing an unyielding structure marriage has a human face which has been perceived more often in sociological terms. So, any effort to define the nature of matrimony, as is the concern in *Jazz* and *The Temple of My Familiar*, has to account not for its 'settled' but its innately 'unsettled' condition.

### III

*Jazz* begins on a note that completely rules out presence of ambivalence in the experience. It is a situation beyond repair. The note of finality in the narrator's tone "S'th, I know this woman" (J, 3)<sup>4</sup> not only spells doom but is cuttingly dismissive. In fact, the note prepares the reader for the curt narration of the events, so to say, from the murder of Dorcas by her lover Joe, moving on to the frenzied attempt by Joe's wife Violet to disfigure the corpse, the emotional discord between them and finally drawing to a close through the information of Felice coming with an Okah record towards Violet. Still, as the narrator says "what turned out different was who shot whom" (J, 6). Indeed, that is another story. But, what is of interest to the reader is to map the process by which perception of Violet changes. Described in the beginning as "mean enough and good looking enough" (J, 4) by the end of the novel she is the one who

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<sup>4</sup>All references to *Jazz* (1992) pertain to the Pan Books edition (1993) given parenthetically in the text and abbreviated as J.

"doesn't lie" (J, 205). The change is not imposed, it grows naturally out of the inherent complexity of Violet's emotional make up.

Change also takes place in perception of the 'wronged wife', 'the other woman' and 'the errant husband' in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Walker tries to bring out the complexity of their experience by providing the presence of an ancestral figure, Ms. Lissie. As the 'one who remembers everything', Ms. Lissie becomes the figure who connects Suwelo with his community. Since the novelist stresses that 'rememberance is the key to redemption', and Ms. Lissie remembers, she becomes the one responsible directly for renewing Suwelo's links with his own self, with his past. For Suwelo, redemption comes through direct interaction with Ms. Lissie while her influence is also evident, even though indirect, in the change in Arveyda's perceptions too.

Rememberance is the basis of responsibility. This is the experiential thrust in *Jazz* as well as *The Temple of My Familiar*. The idea being emphasised in both novels is that until individuals remember and trace back the moments of their duplicity there would never be possibility of an interactive relationship. For all relationships, perhaps more so for the state of marriage this idea is seen as crucial by Walker as well as Morrison. They are alike in their perception of not seeing marriage as an assurance of emotional settlement. It is to bring out actually the 'unsettled' nature of the matrimonial experience that the novelists employ narrative structures which provide structural correlative for the emotional complexity of experience.

In life too there are not easily available patterns of

experiential coherence. The novelists therefore give up a straight forward pattern of narration because it is inadequate to the kind of experience they are interested in exploring. For this purpose they draw on narrative structures which can perhaps more convincingly bring out the complex nature of the experience. The tendency to perceive the black woman's experience in a sociological framework fails to grasp the complexity inlaid in it.

Both novels begin on a note of fragmentation in experience. There is a marital crisis caused by an extra marital affair of the husbands. This perhaps is the most conspicuous similarity between the two novels. From that point onwards the emphasis is on different aspects of the woman's experience of marriage.

*Jazz* is created on the structure of a jazz composition, while *The Temple of My Familiar* employs the narrative structure of a memory module. The narrative module of memory is employed by Walker to highlight literally the presence of connections in the overtly unconnected lives of people. Morrison uses the narrative design of a jazz musical composition and the content of the composition also draws on heavily on the need to remember. The nature of crisis in both the novels is such that the question raised at the beginning can be answered only when there is a movement into the past of each individual. A sense of anxious anticipation is created in the reader right at the beginning of both the novels. Their lives are explored at a point when it is shown that the crisis perhaps grew out of their earlier responses to the relationship.

So, the need to recall is seen as crucial to any effort in reconstruction of lives. The perception of writers towards the

experience shapes the reason and the consequence of the process of remembrance. Walker's novel is designed on the memory module. The idea is to show that disparate lives and broken experiences are joined together only when they make an effort to recall. The connecting line is provided by Ms. Lissie who though not part of the actual experiential crisis of the two couples - Carlotta and Arveyda; Suwelo and Fanny- actually illuminates the nature of their crisis. Her remembrance brings out the cause of their crisis and provides insight into the actual reason of their conflict.

The actual reason of the conflict is also traced in Jazz through remembrance about the nature of their responses and how they had reached the existing situation. It is perhaps in the nature of the narrative technique of the musical composition that even as there is a movement into the past there is also a movement into the present. Morrison employs the antiphonal quality of a Jazz composition to highlight the back and forth movement of the experience. This helps in a simultaneous insight into the nature of responses in the past and how those responses are made part of the present. What this does is to make possible not only a recall of the past but a simultaneous remaking of the present. This is perhaps a more plausible understanding of the nature of memory itself. Even as one remembers the past one constantly and at most surprising of experiential points also refers to the present.

This reference to the present for reshaping it is also the concern of Walker's novel. But, what becomes a natural extension of the nature of memory itself - its continuous referential quality - is not developed integrally because of the actual

narrative design which intersperses the memory of the ancestral figure with the individual concerns of the two couples' lives. The status of Ms. Lissie as the perennial point of reference attenuates the process of integrating the past with the present. Walker's concern is to show that the crisis in the present marking the lives of the couples can be resolved by understanding the nature of their experience in the past. This understanding is made possible by individuals moving into recesses of their memory which reveals that what plagues their lives is not an isolated case but part of the history of the black community, of life itself. In the midst of such recalls the narrative holds the alternative life perceptions posited by Ms. Lissie. This links up the crisis of marriage, of motherhood, of childhood, of old age with the communal memory symbolized in Ms. Lissie.

In *Jazz* the connections between lives are not inserted formally. It is in line with the nature of *jazz* which provides creation of a multiple perspective on the experience. Morrison chooses to draw on the qualities of the musical composition to show the ambivalence in an experience which could be written off as beyond any change. But, as the novel shows, the 'change' takes place even before one actually becomes aware of it.

*Jazz* begins on a note of dismissal. The narrator pronounces categorical judgments on Violet, Joe, Dorcas - players in the sordid love triangle. The manner of narration at this point is linear - moving from one event to another, from one assertion to another. The narrator's tone is explicit, dictatorial, making and demolishing lives as and when desired. Somehow the linear narrative progression becomes an artificial display of coherence

that actually suppresses the simmering tensions underneath and the actual fragmentation of emotional lives. The very categorical tone of the narrator in fact is a technique employed by Morrison as a criticism of authorial hegemony. The exalted position occupied by authorial prerogative to pass judgment on the lives of others and to reshape them is shown to be inadequate by Morrison through her alternative techniques of narration. The assertiveness of the narrator does raise curiosity as to why did Joe get involved? What could be there in his emotional make up which led to the affair and the murder? Is Violet really 'mean enough' and was aunt Alice actually thinking of 'expenses'? In raising questions by its very tone the narrative actually highlights the need to understand the inadequacy of such categorical statements. The tone conveys that ruling out possibility of change in individuals is the reason for inadequacy of preconceived notions.

Walker's concern in *The Temple of My Familiar* is also to eliminate the preconceived notions about relationship and crisis in them. The fragmentation in the inner lives is also brought out by making the narrative episodic. Overtly one experiential strand is not linked to another. And yet it is through such a ruptured narration that Walker manages to convey the fragmentation in their lives. It is shown that the nature of each individual's past, though separate structurally, is similar intrinsically in terms of the experiential content. So, what appears on the surface as separate in terms of the narrative structure is actually connected integrally. This kind of structure is Walker's way to comment on how the lives of black men and women are similar in their trauma

beneath the disparities on the surface. The line of connection threading between these seemingly unconnected lives is intended by Walker to serve as the actual 'collective unconscious' of the black community. The 'collectivity' of black experience has to be followed to understand the process by which the communal consciousness has narrowed down into streams of individualised consciousness. By locating the collective connections in an individual's crisis Walker creates aesthetic resolution out of a moment of experiential crisis.

It is this movement towards a collective connection which characterises the nature of development of marital crisis in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Carlotta's consciousness processes her childhood, youth, love and later marriage to Arveyda. The linear movement in the narrative creates a sense of well being in the reader. This sense of well being receives an abrupt jolt to senses in the immediate shift to Zede's confession of involvement with Arveyda. Zede's plea to her daughter Carlotta about her trauma acquires convincing intensity because of the nature of narration in a dialogical form.

Walker intermittently moves the experience in different narrative voices depending on the kind of response she needs to evoke from the reader. The first person account by Zede of her childhood, youth, her trauma as a slave woman necessitate for the reader seeing Zede not merely as the 'other woman' in her daughter's married life. Zede also has had her own life but one which had been broken into irretrievable parts. A similar kind of fragmentation is part of Suwelo's and Fanny's lives. At this point Walker's concern is to highlight their state of emotional

impasse. Yet, for Suwelo ever as it is for Carlotta the realisation has to be that the lives of those who supposedly do wrong to them - Fanny and Zede - have also received scars. In a way the life of each has been marked.

The coming of Ms. Lissie into the life of Suwelo is intended not only to provide an alternative way of perception of experience for his crisis. Ms. Lissie and Mr. Hal's perfect harmony is aimed actually to comment and also provide encouraging incentive for Suwelo to renew and repair his relationships. It is through Ms. Lissie and Mr. Hal's relationship that the ground is prepared for piecing together fragments of their lives. In the first person accounts of Ms. Lissie and Hal what is made to stand out is the character of Ms. Lissie. She is a woman with many selves and in showing each self Walker is conveying the difficulty of judging another individual categorically. An individual is not parts but is made up of many selves and for a balanced perception the validity of each self needs to be acknowledged.

Carlotta sees her mother Zede only as a mother, one who had suffered and struggled. She cannot envisage the other side of her personality - the nature of her emotional needs which require expression of love. Carlotta had not envisioned that that aspect of her mother still existed. In fact, the inadequacy of Carlotta's view of Zede is substantiated in Zede telling Arveyda the story of her too brief consummation of love for Jesus, Carlotta's father, followed by a drawn out ordeal of rape and torture by her captors. Walker's aim is to show that what may seem integrated on the surface could be broken inside. Ms. Lissie's rendering of her 'many selves' and Hal's acceptance of



them validates the emotional authenticity of Zede's traumatic life narrated immediately after Ms. Lissie's account.

Walker's concern is therefore emphasising that Carlotta's marital crisis has to be seen in the context of Zede's emotional trauma caused by her subjugation by the conquerors. Her degradation as a human being has to be explained before her actions are judged. The fact of connections between the individual and collective history is a point repeated consistently in delineation of other experiential strands as well in the novel.

In Walker's view the root cause for all crisis has been the alienation of human beings from nature, from the life around them. This is attributed to the egotistic nature of human beings who annihilate everything else to sustain their own selves. This was not specifically characteristic of the 'materialism' ingrained in Suwelo because Ms. Lissie too shows her potential for destroying her 'familiar'. The first person account of Ms. Lissie telling Suwelo about the dream of showing him her temple is intended to reveal Ms. Lissie's final acceptance of her own egoism which had destroyed before her relationship with the familiar. It is this severance of the most basic and crucial of relationships which had spelled deception and doom for all relationships, the catastrophe within and outside each individual. The 'pain' of Zede and Jesus is recreated by Arveyda telling the story to Carlotta. In engaging Arveyda as the one who narrates, and makes Carlotta really see her mother, Walker is providing alternative perceptions on the errant husband and the other woman in an extra marital affair. The remembrances of Zede and the subsequent retelling by Arveyda show how the pain of an individual can be transformed into a collective

possession. The moment of Arveyda telling Carlotta her mother's story comes after the remembrance of Zede recalling her love for Jesus and her torture. This movement in the narrative shows the connections underlying the surface distinctness. It provides relevance to Ms. Lissie's remarks later about '*the temple of her familiar*' and traces the crisis in relationships to the breakdown of that most fundamental relationship. The connection between individual and collective histories is emphasised to convey an alternative view of the woman's experience of marriage. Ms. Lissie and Zede though placed diametrically opposite positions due to the individual nature of their crisis are shown to actually belong together due to their histories of oppression.

Jazz is also concerned to show the manner by which the community impinges on an individual's life. The narrator's description of the city life is intended to show the life outside the individual. The nonchalance and the unconcerned rush of people and emotions brings out the character of city life. It is a life whose very basis has meant negation of the collective character of individual life. Instead it has thrived on the individual apart from the collective. The city is drawn in cursory, skimming tones by the narrator to give the reader a feel of the meleè of emotions and experiences encountered by people from the country. The tide of people moving into the city are actually alienated from one another.

The narrator's tone gives the impression that nothing is reliable in the city, least of all, the people. And yet the very contradiction of such a stance is located in it as the narrator moves, as if unwillingly steps, into the household of Violet and

Joe. The presence of life, tension and humanity existing in the city is underscored as one sees Violet and Joe at close quarters. The narrative drops the condescending tone and sympathises with the pall of gloom shadowing Violet and Joe's lives after the murder of Dorcas. The unreliability of perception whether of the narrator or the character is pointed out by the swiftly changing impressions of Dorcas's picture by Joe and Violet. It is to show that perhaps the sight is as treacherous as the mind, perhaps what one sees or hears is not the only way to perceive it because each individual shapes and sees an experience individually. Perhaps we see only what we want to see.

"If the tiptoer is Joe Trace, driven by loneliness from his wife's side, then the face stares at him without hope or regret and it is the absence of accusation that wakes him, still hungry for her company. No finger points, her lips don't turn down in judgement. Her face is calm, generous and sweet. But if the tiptoer is Violet the photograph is not that at all. The girl's face looks greedy, haughty and very lazy" (J, 12). The ambivalence marking individual perception becomes the point of emphasis as the narrator moves into Violet and Joe's home. Gradually the know-all tone of the narrator fades away and is replaced by a narrator who is not so pompous. Or perhaps the fading away of the earlier narrator is done to draw more distinctively the personality of Violet. The narrator recognises in Violet's home an expression of her personality and refrains from making derogatory remarks about her being 'mean enough'. In fact, what becomes evident through the movement from city to home is the presence of humanity of an individual when seen closely

even in the midst of alienating urbanization. It is as if Violet's home is reflection of her desire to maintain real touch with her surroundings, a far cry from the contact with nature which she had foregone in a rush to come to the city.

It is possible that what may seem unconnected on the surface is actually part of the experience as a whole. So, what may seem at first to be no connection is actually an indication of the different kinds of connections. The evidence of Violet's "private cracks" (J, 25) gives an inside view of her, one which makes ~~it~~ possible to see the silent suffering that she went through. What is of interest is that the narrative presents dialogically the scenes of her 'surface life' - her conversation with women in dark rooms, conversation with other women, the long drawn out negotiation of her motives about the baby given by the sister for holding on to. All these are graphically presented but what is left out, and what perhaps is most important, is what is going on inside her, how she is coping with life. On all those aspects the narrative is silent which perhaps speaks more eloquently for the inner plight of Violet. It is in the strategised silence of her suffering that the reader gradually begins to sympathise with Violet. It becomes possible gradually to think of Violet apart from the categorical statement made about her in the beginning.

It is not only the 'wronged wife' but also the errant husband who is rendered in humane terms. It is interesting to note that each individual is shown to possess integral complexity that rejects the lumping together of motives within the slot of only an extramarital affair. What really goes into the making of human motives in an action? Is it possible to list them early? Joe

Trace is at the beginning seen only as a murderer of his lover, a man who probably wanted to have his last fling. But even as our perception of Violet changes, views about Joe also undergo change. Immediately succeeding a view of Violet's 'private cracks' is the narrative shift into Joe's consciousness. At this point perhaps the complexion of the experience would be different if it was shown that Joe was in some way connected to Violet even though not aware of her 'private cracks'.

Instead the narrative shifts into Joe's consciousness and picks his experience from his memory of Dorcas. This is deliberate, even callous, because it does not sustain a sympathetic view of Violet. Yet, what Morrison is concerned with is to create sympathy not only for Violet but for Joe as well. As in a musical composition, each note is different from the other and each has a life, a depth, an experiential specificity of its own. And yet, it is in the rendering of the combination of those sounds that insight into the experience is created. This is possible because of an underlying emotion which creates meaningful particularity in the combination of those sounds.

Similarly, what may seem at first glance as no connection between one experience and another is actually a way to show the very complex ways in which one life is connected to the other. The narrator shows barely concealed sarcasm when talking of Joe's memory of Dorcas but the experience itself develops into a poignant evocation of the internal silence and search that has been part of Joe ever since he put his hand inside the bush, in the forest, for some response from his mother. There was a side of Joe not known perhaps even to Violet. It was 'that' side which

Joe had shown to Dorcas. Like Violet, Joe too had to recognise the validity of 'this' and 'that' of his experience and also create within himself a sensitivity that can accept the presence of contradictory, complex impulses in Violet as well.

The long narration and shift from Joe's consciousness to the narrator describing Joe and Violet's journey to the City is a mixture of anticipation and anxiousness. The hurly and burly of the life that awaited them in the city is created right in the narration of the journey to the city. The journey is an indication of the nature of things to come. The way in which the rush of life makes it difficult to retain individual humanity of the self shows the impact of alienation on the inner lives of individuals. This perhaps creates the reason for Joe to seek a center for individual sustenance in his affair with Dorcas. Somewhere, in the middle of this overwhelming presence, Joe began to feel diminished. In order to assert the validity of his personhood, at least in one aspect of life, Joe plunged into an affair with Dorcas. Somehow the narration of the journey gives an inkling of the nature of loss between Violet and Joe. From a point when they moved to the city 'her hip bones rubbed his thigh as they stood in the aisles unable to stop smiling' (J, 33) to the point 'where they were still a couple but barely speaking to each other' (J, 36) - the journey had been towards a growing inner silence amidst all the hub. So, it is not as if the 'cracks' were only within Violet, they were also part of Joe. At this point Joe's justification to Malvonne for renting her place to have his amorous tete-a-tete with Dorcas is that Violet is undergoing her 'Change' (J, 46).

The 'change' is referring most probably to the emotional and psychological changes in a woman during menopause. But, as has been shown the label 'change' is very inadequate to draw out the complexity of Violet's experience, the gradual drifting into a silence. The 'change' has not been overnight, in fact the 'change' could be a visible manifestation of the invisible workings within her for emotional losses and silences. In fact, Joe's later revelation of his many changes, not less than six, refer to the times he had to change his name, his occupation, not only of the different nature of 'changes' between men and women. More elementally, it refers to the possibility of the impact of such 'changes' on his emotional make-up. If that is to be accepted then perhaps Joe's reason for the affair, Violet's change, is a lame excuse. And who knows what was the impact of Joe's changes on Violet? Perhaps her 'private cracks' carry moments of adjusting the seams of herself to the personality of Joe. The onus for their drifting apart is not put squarely on either Joe or Violet. The emphasis is more to show that, unknown to the one most close, the seams may begin to burst in the emotional fabric of a relationship.

Fanny in *The Temple of My Familiar* is also undergoing 'change' but the 'change' is rendered in terms differently from Jazz. She is shown to suffer dissatisfaction with her marriage to Suwelo. The narrative shifts into dialogical narration as Fanny asks Suwelo for separation. Before this scene Suwelo has told Hal and Ms. Lissie of his marital problems with Fanny but his rendering in first person creates intense subjectivity. It is that subjectivity which undermines the credibility of his

statements because juxtaposed to his perceptions are Ms. Lissie's comments which highlight possible selfishness on Suwelo's part in responding to the changes in Fanny.

Fanny's crisis is seen to be the crisis of one who seeks sustenance beyond the existing experiential parameters for self definition. The dialogical presentation of Fanny's predicament gives an element of directness and contemporaneity to the experience and shows actually the nature of Suwelo's inability to understand Fanny. The necessity for Fanny to seek alignment with her roots in order to make coherent other aspects of her experience, including marriage is emphasised. This is done by focusing extensively on the nature of Fanny's responses to her visit to her father in South Africa and the changes, which are shown as vibrant, made evident through the tone of her letters.

The narrative from this point moves into memories of Fanny's father, mother and her sister. The reviving change in Fanny is seen to be the result of this realignment with her past which has helped her gain a hold and a perspective about her experience. The employing of the dialogical narrative impugns Suwelo and the use of first person account further validates Fanny's search for her self. Amidst all this Suwelo is seen as the one who did not understand or empathize with her crisis.

It is through Suwelo's consciousness that his affair with Carlotta and his insensitivity towards her are being processed. What this creates is not a very favourable view of Suwelo which further justifies Fanny's dissatisfaction with her marriage. Suwelo's insensitivity is shown to extend not only to Fanny but to Carlotta as well. His coming back to Fanny after recognition of



the validity of her crisis is the result of Ms. Lissie's redeeming powers. It was recalling of the trauma and travails suffered by black women, by nature, at the hands of humans that makes Suwelo see the worthlessness of his own perspective. Suwelo's recognition of Fanny's worth and his own hypocrisy is Walker's offer of resolution of the crisis between them. In fact, as Walker puts it, the black male has to recognise a woman's need for quest, for self definition and not suppress it. It is this realisation that makes Suwelo finally a kindred spirit to Fanny. The narrative till this point is developed on a linear scale with Fanny's experience being the focus till it reaches a stage when Suwelo and Fanny finally join hands in 'strugglehood' (TTOHF, 322)<sup>5</sup>.

Resolution is created also in *Jazz* but it is on different lines from *The Temple of My Familiar*. The resolution is not to show the specific points from which the change in a relationship begins to take place. It is interesting to note that while the memory mode is used by Walker there is actually a clear line of linear progression of experience. The experience in *Jazz* also reaches a point of resolution but the narrative is developed in a way that makes each part an independent whole. It is to show that each life is self sustaining as well as connected to another. Therefore, though the experience is shown to have come through the crisis it is not as if growing gradually towards it. What is shown at each point is the innate complex quality of each life

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<sup>5</sup>All references to the *Temple of My Familiar* (1989) pertain to the H. Brace Jovanovich edition (1989) given parenthetically in the text and abbreviated as **TTOHF**.

which makes for the open-ended nature of the denouement of the crisis in the experience.

Violet comes through the crisis and somehow her intrinsic nature proves incorrect the label of 'violent' for her. To reinforce the ambivalent nature of her experience Morrison employs the analogy of the Jazz composition. It is not very specifically explicit at which point one sound moves into another to give a different meaning, even as it is difficult to say at what point one life becomes not a negative but an affirming presence for the other. Even as Alice Manfred wonders about the reason for Dorcas's murder, in comes through the door the wife of the murderer. She is 'Violent' and yet as things turn out, there develops some kind of connection between them. So, without knowing and without pretext some meaningful patterns emerge out of their mutual combination. So much so that it becomes difficult after one point to say who was good or bad for the other. And this is perhaps the moment when Morrison builds up to a climax her perception on ambivalence in experience as symbolised in the structure of a jazz composition. It validates Morrison's view that in life it is difficult to say which are the lines dividing good from bad, the innocent from the sinner, errant from faithful, and violent (this) from (that) non-violent. This is illustrated through the narrative structure which bears out Morrison's affirmation conveyed at the beginning of *Jazz* in the word of *The Nag Hammadi* in '*Thunder, Perfect Mind*',

I am the name of the sound  
and the sound of the name.

I am the sign of the letter

and the designation of the division.

Violet reaches the point of self-realisation through Alice Manfred by an unthought of combination of experiences and responses.

Violet realises later, 'perhaps I had lived the life of another for too long, that I needed to be one -just me - and not 'this' or 'that' Violet". It is this realisation which makes possible for Violet and Joe to again begin "laughing together or acting like the ground was a dance-hall floor" (J, 36). Violet recognises that getting married was perhaps not the beginning of a 'settled' life because it had not made her realise her real self. In fact, what is brought out is the difficulty of reaching the point of 'laughing together or dancing' because right "from the beginning I was a substitute and so was he" (J, 97). Marriage, she realises was not like the notion of "Here comes the new. Look out there goes the sad stuff" (J, 7), because it had not led to the birth of the real Violet. Not until she recognises the inadequacy of trying to be "White, Light, Young again" (J, 208) would Violet get out of the 'private cracks'.

A resolution of sorts is reached but it is more in terms of the realisation of Joe and Violet of their own 'cracks'. Not only them, the narrator too has humbled and realised that probably "[I] missed it altogether" (J, 220). Even as life went on and people were 'busy being original, complicated, changeable - human' the narrator had stuck to the idea of seeing 'past' as "an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack" (J, 221). It is only later that realising the complex humanness of Joe and Violet that the narrator accepts the flux of life which points out

"say make me, remake me" (J, 229).

'Past' in *The Temple of My Familiar* is seen as a glorified, static entity. This is why Ms. Lissie's remembrance becomes the singular point of reference for Fanny, Carlotta, Zede, Olivia and Nguingha. Life of each one is filled with a history that at some point becomes a reiteration of the belief that black women have been oppressed at all points of experience. This is also the reason that Ms. Lissie's presence becomes a way to perceive the alternative to existing perceptions about black woman's experience of matrimony and her inner crisis. The resolution reached in the novel is an extension of Walker's view which rejects the conventional view of marriage as an institution. Instead, Walker suggests that the inner crisis of women would be resolved only when the males recognise their many selves, only when each partner recognises the presence of complex responses in another resisting stereotyping of the individual. Arveyda, Carlotta, Suwelo and Fanny are shown to have agreed on such a view of life and are seen living together as partners. That this is what Walker is thinking in terms of recovering the 'wholeness' of the community is made clear by the shift into Ms. Lissie's recall. It is at this point that Ms. Lissie explicitly states how at the earliest moments of existence she had searched for the male who could recognise her many selves and this was uncle Rafe, the one who loved her in all her moods and forms.

Walker conveys the necessity of delving into individual past in order to recognise the nature and reason of experiential crisis. For a woman, marriage, in Walker's view, has meant complete suppression of her self. In fact, until a woman can

reveal and like all her selves there would only be oppression and emotional deprivation for her.

Morrison too in *Jazz* tries to show the need to integrate 'this' and 'that' aspect of the self in order to recognise the nature of one's quest. Walker's novel stresses that males need to recognise actually the presence of women's many selves. Whereas Morrison shows that there is possibility of self duplicity not only in men but women as well, Walker's emphasis is on showing that the potential of self duplicity is innate more in black males, and in those individuals who alienate themselves from the black cultural heritage. Morrison's novel shows women also to be capable of self duplicity and equally capable of destroying a relationship. *Jazz* unlike *The Temple of My Familiar* refrains from showing a black woman only as a victim within matrimony.

## CHAPTER V

### WOMAN AS NURTURER : CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF MOTHERHOOD

The experience of motherhood has conventionally been defined as a sublime state of happiness and well being for women. Somehow the birth of a child or an anticipation of the moment is a sign of hope, of life amidst all the darkness, death and despair. A child symbolises recreation of life and an individual expression of extending life beyond one's own self. The underlying symbolic potential in the experience is drawn upon by writers to create images about the creator of life - 'Mother'.

Motherhood has been associated with different images and social expectations. The experience has more often led to creation of idealised images about the mother. Societies have seen motherhood as 'the' experience for a woman, something which is essential to be a complete woman. Yet, what is limiting in such views is the emphasis on the physical condition of motherhood. Someone who has not actually gone through the pangs and pain of childbirth is more often regarded as incapable of nurturing any child. More painfully, those who hold such views see a woman who is 'not a mother' in the physical sense to be deprived even of the instinct to nurture another human being. Such a woman is looked down by society as someone completely bereft of feelings. If she has not given birth, then she is not seen as capable of experiencing affection, a feeling of protectiveness and caring.

If we dissociate the nurturing instinct from the physical condition of motherhood then it is possible to recognise the

inadequacy of idealised images about the mother. To care for and nourish a life is not only possible through the umbilical chord. The strings of attachment are rooted in the heart and not only in the womb. It is possible for a mother to give birth to a child and still fail to plant the seeds of confidence and affection in the child. Therefore, the instinct to nurture a life and the physical process of creation of life, are two separate aspects of an experience.

Feminists at the very outset saw in motherhood a social role also designed to perpetrate the subjugation of women and hegemony of males. Feminists' fundamental opposition to any institutionalised living patterns is aimed to free women from the exploitation underlying them. Still, like the patriarchal 'old guard' perception, the feminists also to a point perceived the physical condition as inseparable from the nurturing instinct. Gradually though, the feminist ideology too has recognised that nurturing is a state of mind and for that a woman does not have to be forced into the physical condition of motherhood. In making an effort to recognise links, between emotional crisis and the desire to nurture, the feminists are moving towards a point where they want to humanise perceptions about women without a stringent need to engage in male bashing.

Black feminists too show a willingness to see motherhood as an emotional attitude which is not dependent on the physical condition. They oppose the traditional views on motherhood because caught within them the black woman has had to accede to the domination not only of males within the black community but

whites as well. As part of the dominated racial group black women have had to create alternative definitions from within the stereotyped roles established by racist and sexist control groups. Afro-American women writers have also redefined the nature of experience of motherhood in an effort to provide an alternative perception.

Alice Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* also shows the significance of a nourishing environment on Ruth ensconced safely within the warmth of her grandfather Grange's home. The point which is of importance to Walker is that only Grange can provide a nurturing support system to Ruth and be to her both father and mother because he has recognised the plight of black women and their trauma. More so, he had realised the dehumanising consequence of looking up to whites for values and norms of behaviour towards black women. Walker's 'womanist' inclination highlights, in this novel, nurturing as a quality of mind which is not to be associated with gender. It is present in black men too but develops only when they actually realise the impact of their degrading behaviour towards black women.

The universalist perspective differs from the 'womanist' view of motherhood. Black feminists' redefine the meaning of motherhood for the purpose of highlighting as well as resisting its traditionally oppressive nature. The universalist perspective in contrast focusses on the individual nature of response to motherhood which cannot be classified within a rhetoric of oppression and victimization.



This chapter compares the portrayal of black women as mothers in Alice Walker's novel *Meridian* (1976) and Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) from a universalist perspective. The aim is to compare and contrast the novelists' perceptions in their effort to alter existing stereotypes about the experience of being a mother.

## II

It is not as if *Alice Walker* and *Toni Morrison* have initiated this focus on Afro-American woman's experience of motherhood. Concern for highlighting her individuality led their predecessors also to explore different experiential dimensions. Writing from individual perspectives the writers did share a common concern to make people see the human face of the institution of motherhood. Black community's experience has historically been marked with enormous violence- physical as well as psychological - and the writer's aim is to show its impact on the notion of motherhood. An experience which is held as the symbol of life - motherhood -has more than one face to it . The face of a happy and contented woman aglow in the state of motherhood is a reality but also real is the plight of women who are nervous wrecks, simmering with an unexpressed agony lying under an array of performances of maternity. But the images of women as mothers very often overlook the agony and instead play upon the glow of maternity.

Black women writers have from the beginning, in fact right in the slave narratives, tried to create a view of experience which showed deeper and a more realistic representation of the slave's condition. It is not as if a woman writer expressed more enduringly the nature of a mother's experience. Still what was

made available in the works of women writers was range of insights into her experience which were not always present in narratives written by white writers. Narratives by slave women are the earliest autobiographical expressions of what it meant to be a slave mother.

*Beloved*, the novel by Toni Morrison, is actually a completion of the circle that began with the first of the slave mother's description of her ordeal of journey to freedom. What was begun in the autobiographical documentation of a slave mother's life has matured in Morrison's novel into an evocative journey of every woman. *Beloved* recreates the complex, torturous reality of being a slave mother which had not been possible earlier, and also the harrowing conditions which could not be described with directness due to the censoring scrutiny of white publishers.

Though exploring different time periods in the history of the black community *Meridian* and *Beloved* offer comparative possibilities. *Meridian* delineates a black woman's struggle for self definition placed within the folds of Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. *Meridian's* struggle though set within the movement has a focus similar to that in *Beloved* which describes the period of Abolitionists' Movement in the nineteenth century American society. Both novels show a black woman's effort to give meaning to her life. She is shown to struggle for a life situation which is compatible to her own innermost desires. The dramatic interest in the novels is provided by the nature of her desires and the consequent hostile response of the community. *Meridian* and *Sethe* struggle to create a more meaningful pattern

their lives but their very effort is in conflict with existing images of motherhood.

Sethe, a slave mother in Kentucky of 1800s chooses to kill her infant daughter rather than have her subjected to the indignities of slavery. In committing the act Sethe defies the dictum of slave owners which was not a formal ordinance but was known to every slave. This dictum was the cruel reality that, his or her child was not finally to remain his or hers once the child reached an age of being useful to the white master. Sethe defies this imposition and makes a decision to choose for her children. She wanted her children to grow before her eyes. She did not want to be left trying to recall, like her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, the features of her children and never actually knowing their individual likes and dislikes. Sethe did not want to be left with nothing. She chose to free her children and arranged for their journey to freedom. As if this defiance was not enough Sethe also threw aside the norms of behaving in the spirit of 'True Motherhood' within the black community itself. She went against the ideal of 'Black Motherhood', as one who would protect the life of her children at any cost. She killed her daughter and her act was a sacrilege against the cherished ideals of the community. Even for slave mothers the effort was always to try to save the lives of their children. Slave narratives are filled with exemplary deeds of slave mothers who endured everything, every torture, to protect their children because that was the only beautiful thing they were allowed to create.

Morrison is responding in a revisionary manner to the notion of ideal 'Motherhood' as presented in the slave narratives and early works of fiction by Afro-American writers'. Motherhood meant seeing children as beautiful and seeing the experience of maternity as an unsoiled, pure state of existence. In *Beloved* Morrison shows that it is possible for a woman not only to love and protect but also to hate and abandon her baby because of the circumstances surrounding a child's birth. For a slave mother conception was not always by love but through rape too. The white slave owner or a fellow male slave on the injunctions of the master sexually assaulted a slave woman forcing her to produce more slaves. Sethe's mother, it is shown, had abandoned, in fact thrown overboard, all her babies who were conceived by force. She had kept only Sethe because she was conceived in love. In showing a realistic possibility of individual choices Morrison's effort is to demolish the ideal norm of 'True Motherhood' forced upon black women.

Sethe had made her choice and was branded as an outcast by the community. She was not an ideal black mother as per the norms of the black community and therefore had to be ostracized. Since she had gone against the social expectations of what a mother is supposed to be Sethe was regarded as one not capable of loving or nurturing her children. Morrison's effort in the novel is to demolish one dimensional, idealised perceptions of black women and alternately show their actual humanity. Women who are different kind of mothers are not necessarily to be regarded as lesser kind of human beings. Meridian, like Sethe, rejects the norms of

society regarding the expectations and functions to be performed by a black mother. Meridian is also like Sethe different from the existing views on motherhood and of what it takes to be a real mother. Sethe had gone against the existing norms not only by, first, loving her children too much which is not done for slaves but also, secondly, through that love choosing to kill her daughter. Likewise, Meridian in her situation had gone against the prevailing norms. She chose not to join the ranks of those Civil Rights activists' who condoned violence for the sake of revolution.

Meridian chooses to differ from the prevailing social attitudes and separates herself from the violence. As is shown in the novel Meridian stands alone in her stance. She wills her self to stand alone even though it meant going against the community. Her decision to give away her son was part of her struggle to give meaning to her life. She also chooses to go against the traditional expectations of motherhood. Both decisions grew out of her need to be true to her own inner quest for selfhood. She made her own choices. Going by the general opinion Meridian is not the right activist and also she is not the right kind of mother. She is not 'right' according to the norms of the group. Though the nature of Meridian and Sethe's experience is different it is shown that they are not any less caring and nurturing towards another's life.

### III

Black women's experience of motherhood was the concern of some earlier writers as well. Ann Petry's novel *The Street*

published in 1942 is one of the earlier and convincing portraits of a black mother<sup>1</sup>. Lutie Johnson's crisis in the novel is her struggle to give a decent life to her son in an urban black ghetto. The tragic nature of her struggle is the culmination of the overall effort by Petry to show Lutie's ordeal humanely. The novelist resists showing the world in black and white, one in which the black is better than the white, since this is not Petry's aim. Her novel manages to raise Lutie to heroic dimensions without negating the individual humanity of others and the reality of crisis in their lives as well. Petry's unbiased grasp of Lutie's emotional dilemma saves the portrayal from becoming an epitaph on the heroic black mother.

*Brown Girl, Brown Stones*, a novel by Paule Marshall, published in 1954 was another significant creative effort to recreate the complex nature of experience. Like Petry, Marshall also tried to resist delineating the society in black and white colours. In fact, Marshall shows the possibility of more than these two colours in explicit symbolic terms, showing the presence of brown as well. It is also at this overt symbolic level that Marshall offers a different perception on motherhood.

Silla, the mother of Selina, who is the 'brown girl' in the 'brown stone house', is a mother who has aspirations different from those approved by the Barbadian community. Her need for material gains is more often commented upon by critics as the

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<sup>1</sup>Pryse, Marjorie. "Pattern Against the Sky: Deism and Motherhood in Ann Petry's *The Street*". *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and the Literary Tradition*. eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985. 116-131.

source of her misery and somehow she is made out to be the villainess of the piece. It is considered wrong for her to possess the desire for materialistic gains because critics see in it a manifestation of subordination to white values. Yet, this is only one aspect of Silla's personality. It is to Marshall's credit that she portrays Silla neither as completely good nor completely bad but as an individual possessing a mass of contradictory emotions. Her decisions and desires are presented realistically enough to be individualised. Silla is a mother but she is also an individual and Marshall's focus is on the individual. The focus of the writer prevents the novel from launching into a diatribe against materialistic mothers who for the sake of their aspirations oppose the growing consciousness of their children.

*Meridian* and *Beloved* are also part of the efforts made to represent the individual humanity of a black mother. In a way, both the novels are showing black mothers caught within the vortex of violence in their lives and in the society. Sethe's act of violence is not easily acceptable according to the norms of the society which thrived on violence against slaves. *Meridian's* act of giving away her child is shown to be not so irreparable by Walker as the act of killing white people for liberation of one's own community. Perhaps, Walker is trying to convey that *Meridian's* actions are inspired by the need to more importantly resist violation of another life. She did not want to destroy her son the way her mother had impaired her -- emotionally. In the same way she did not want to be party to a liberation which meant

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violation of the basic human duty, to nurture another life.

Meridian is averse to the idea of taking another's life. Instead she is willing to sacrifice her own self, her youth, her health and her very existence. The importance of her actions is recognised when they are seen in the context of the decisions made earlier. Walker establishes Meridian as a nurturer from the very beginning. The reader sees her for the first time through the narrating consciousness of Truman. As Meridian's lover and a prominent Civil Rights activist, Truman plays an important part in her life. Walker's aim is to point out the actual superficiality in Truman's nature as an example of the principles of self aggrandizement popular in some outfits of Civil Rights Movement. Therefore, when Truman says "How can you not love somebody, like that"<sup>2</sup> (M, 22) on seeing Meridian, the statement is intended more for the sake of creating an impression about her as well as a point of reference to understand Truman's moral cowardice.

Meridian, as she is shown at the beginning of the novel, has not, in the conventional sense, reached a pinnacle point in her life. Her perception of the meridian point is different from the expected levels of society. Anyone seeing her dressed as a wayfarer, dishevelled and giving a look of extreme pallor would not say that she is in her best of moments. But, Walker sees her otherwise and that is why she shows Meridian through the eyes and voice of Truman, the one who has attained the 'Meridian' point

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<sup>2</sup>All references to Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) pertain to the Pocket Books edition (1986) given parenthetically in the text and abbreviated as **M**.

according to the expectations of society. And yet, as is revealed gradually Truman is impoverished in spirit, while Meridian without possessing anything materialistic was rich in her soul. Meridian had given up everything, all that was approved and expected by the society but had retained the integrity of her spirit. Truman, as Meridian says, was in the habit of 'running away' (M, 27). Meridian was not. Probably that is the reason she can suffer without pitying herself. She can perform daredevil acts, taking part in a circus act which literally shows her being blown over by a tank. Still, she has no self pity because sometimes only one "who's ready to suffer" (M, 25) can do so. The dialogical mode of narrative here is a technique which eloquently highlights the contrastive life values represented by Truman and Meridian.

Meridian's innate strength to do so is shown gradually as an alternative possibility to the frenzied call for violence against whites as espoused by some black Civil Rights workers in Meridian's college.<sup>3</sup> From the dialogically rendered narrative at the beginning the shift immediately after is into an authorial controlled narration of Meridian's resistance to the notion of violence in the movement. The idea being built up is to first convince the reader of Meridian's stance and then make it credible by showing her different perception of things even in the past. Her struggle against mob psyche was part of her ongoing process to reach a point within her own self where she would be so attuned as to forsake even the notion of psychological violation of another.

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<sup>3</sup>Stein, Kara F. "Meridian: Alice Walkers Critique of Revolution". *Black American Literature Forum*. 20 (Spring/Summer. 1986).129-141.

Meridian had at all points been working towards that state of mind, where the very thought of possession — of a thing, of another life was eliminated. In Meridian's view, this was possible only when she could willingly give up the possessions envied by others, those of materialistic things, and even the desire to possess a human being.<sup>4</sup>

Her disenchantment rendered in authorial voice creates a picture of Meridian who is alienated from the ongoing politics of the movement. Her reason for doing so are that she responds to each individual sensitively. If she is so sensitive to the needs of a destitute child then what led her to give away her own son is the question that is answered in the course of seeing Meridian's struggle for selfhood. In the eyes of the society Meridian is not sensitive to her child's needs. This is the condemnation and harangue voiced by Meridian's mother when she knows of her plans to give away the child. Her mother's shock and disgust are expression of her extreme disappointment with Meridian. Meridian, in her view, was defying the revered ideals of 'True Motherhood'. The reader refrains from such a harsh judgement on Meridian because there is evidence given to the contrary, before the revelation of her decision to give away the child. Her caring instincts are substantially demonstrated in 'The Wild Child' episode. Walker builds up a portrait of Meridian which makes it difficult to agree with her mother's accusation that Meridian is

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<sup>4</sup>Wade-Gayles, Gloria. "Giving Birth to Self: The Quests for Wholeness of Sula Mae Peace and Meridian Hill". *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction*. New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984. 184-215.

'a monster' (M,89). The 'Wild Child' episode is placed after the episode at the circus and strengthens Meridian's portrait as actually a nurturing person, capable of immense love and affection.<sup>5</sup>

Meridian's decision to give away her child was also prompted by the need to save him from emotional deprivation that she had endured. Her mother had gradually slipped into an uneasy acceptance of the condition of motherhood. Since she had not accepted it from her heart the emphasis was on keeping up appearances. As a result Meridian always felt only 'guilt' (M, 49) with her mother. She expected to be chided every moment for having done something wrong. The absence of a rapport between Meridian and her mother left a void within Meridian but she possessed the insight to save her own son from such a situation.

Walker's narrative technique, therefore, intends to show the actual potential in Meridian to love and care for another person. Walker is showing that a woman who rejects the conventional definitions of motherhood is not to be written off as incapable of any nurturing instinct. It is just that she expresses the instinct in ways that are different and not so exhibitionist as anticipated by the society. Walker is successful in conveying to the reader that she does not see Meridian's decision in the wrong and she engages techniques of narration that build up the impression forcefully. Perhaps a little too forcefully. Walker establishes Meridian as actually possessing nurturing instincts

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<sup>5</sup>McGowen, Martha J. "Atonement and Release in Alice Walker's *Meridian*". *Critique*. 23(1981).25-36.

and shows the inadequacy of society's notions of 'true motherhood'. But, what is not equally developed as a result of Walker's singular concern is the humanity of Truman, Meridian's mother and Mary Ann. The presence of the authorial voice is Walker's technique for strengthening her view on the significance of Meridian's struggle and her stance. Yet, the narrative technique blankets possible articulation of other points of view. Meridian emerges as a positive presence standing out against the voices of dissent. The hovering authorial voice does not create much of a space for the articulation of voices antagonistic to Meridian. Meridian's significance as an individual expression of changing views on motherhood would have acquired depth if insight was possible also into the complexity inlaid into the lives of those who held a traditional view on the experience.

In contrast Morrison's narrative strategy in the opening sections of *Beloved* allows for a range of different opinions on Sethe's act. The opening lines are categorical : "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (B, 3)<sup>6</sup>. What is suggested to the reader is a dark, brooding experience marked by nemesis coming to haunt Sethe guilty of killing her infant daughter. And yet, as the opening sections unfold the killing becomes not a moment to pass judgments on Sethe or for that matter on others. The individual responses of her sons, her other daughter and Sethe's mother-in-law Baby Suggs are laid out in the very beginning. The technique of multiple narrators is helpful in individualising the

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<sup>6</sup>All references to *Beloved* (1987) pertain to the Picader edition (1988) given parenthetically in the text and abbreviated as B.

response of each one. The presence of the slain daughter's ghost in the house evokes different responses from the family members but what it makes possible is multiple perceptions, each significant in its own place, not cancelling or negating the other. The net result of such a technique is Morrison's success in showing complicated and multiple dimensions within an experience which is lumped more in terms of a murder by a mother. Sethe is not portrayed as the only positive element in the entire network of experience but her humanity comes through the responses of those whose lives touch her life.

The shift in narrative voice is made to highlight the complexity in responses not only in Sethe but others as well. From a dialogical narrative between Sethe and Denver about what plagues the ghost, the narrative moves into Sethe's consciousness, as when Sethe says that nothing is more "powerful than the way [I] loved her" (B, 4). The move into Sethe's consciousness illustrates for us the method by which she had managed to get the word 'Beloved' carved on her tombstone. She had allowed herself to be raped by the carver. Her regret was not for the action but, "that with another ten minutes could she have got "Dearly" too?" (B, 5). This shift is crucial as it very forcefully conveys the actual emotional generosity in Sethe's nature showing the flaws in the prevailing hostility of the community towards Sethe. Moving inward the shift establishes the immense love that Sethe had for her daughter. It was a love which could not be written off as murder. Had it not been so deep Sethe would not have agreed to be raped. She gave what she could and that it happened to be her own

self is indeed a pathetic agonising evidence of her actual love for the child, in spite of the views to the contrary which were afloat in the community.

It is not possible to pass judgements about her act of killing her daughter. But, Sethe could never get rid of the feeling of 'oily blood' (B, 5) on her hands and she tried her best to 'keep the past at bay'. Morrison sees the experience not in blocks where one part is left behind before moving on to the other. Each carries the baggage of the past within one's soul. So did Sethe. Morrison's aim is to show the emotional implications of the act on Sethe and those connected to her. Her aim is not to draw Sethe as an alternative mother figure exemplary in her fortitude as opposed to others.

Sethe had chosen to kill her daughter but that does not mean that she is a woman incapable of love and caring. It is not to be assumed that her innate feelings of maternal love have been wiped out due to that act. Morrison does not think so and she illustrates this by giving a dialogical narration of Sethe defending her love for Denver to Paul D. It may seem ironical when Sethe tells Paul D, "[I'll] protect her when [I'm] live and protect her when [I] ain't" (B,45). A woman who had murdered her daughter and had been in prison for the murder is proclaiming that she wanted to and would 'protect' her daughter because for her "it is not even a choice". Ironical but real. Though Sethe chooses to kill her daughter, yet at some point the will to do so was part of her emotional make up, coming instinctively to her. She had chosen by the complex instincts of love and possessiveness in her.

Sethe fiercely protects Denver because 'the cost' of the earlier journey to freedom had been 'too much'. She had "nothing in between but the daughter [I'm] holding in [my] arms" (B,15). Sethe is shown to be even now capable of loving and protecting her child. But, the fierce protectiveness in Sethe's love indicates actually the fear in her heart. She did not want to lose her last child. In showing Sethe's emotional responses through first person statements, Morrison gives credibility to the overall concern of portraying Sethe as actually a loving mother in spite of being labelled as a murderer and being looked down upon by people.

Morrison's strategies of narration in contrast to Walker's are designed to bring out the possible complexity and depth of character in others besides Sethe. She is not the redeemer of an experiential set up. She is shown to be part of the experience which is linked with intense emotional lives of others as well. The focus is to show that Sethe possesses the instinct to love and care which have not died with Beloved. Her effort to keep 'the past at bay' had meant closing all her senses on the world around her. It is only when the past is opened up that Sethe can feel again. But, the process is complicated because the opening up of the 'tin box', the heart, means being open to the responses of others.

Beloved comes back to Sethe. Morrison by the use of complex symbolic undertones and the nature of responses manages to give the ghost story a convincing air. Sethe's urgent need to relieve herself on seeing Beloved's figure for the first time is seen as



symbolic of the waters breaking from the womb, an indication that Beloved was Sethe's slain daughter. Beloved's mention of the crystal earrings of Sethe; the dark place under the earth (the grave); the bridge where she was left behind is also unnerving. Though explicit, what these symbolic overtones do is to make evident the impact of Sethe's act on the one who was at the receiving end. To give Beloved's remembrances in first person account is greatly incriminating against Sethe and creates sympathy for the slain daughter. At this point the concern is not so much to show Beloved's sense of betrayal as much as her sense of helplessness.<sup>7</sup> Doing so is Morrison's strategy and it highlights her aim to show the validity of other points of view. It is true that Sethe had endured torture and wanted to spare her daughter but examples are given in the novel to show that Sethe was not completely correct in her decision for Beloved. She could also have made an error in her interpretation of the moment. Everything at this point creates a view of Sethe as the culprit. The balance of sympathy and pity is tilted towards Beloved since her condition is unchangeable and her life is irretrievable. This gives greater emotional weightage to the morbid broodings of Beloved.

Sethe is an individual and the nature of her individuality is manifested in response to the experience as a whole. Her nature was such that she took upon herself all that happened. Sethe took

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<sup>7</sup>House, Elizabeth B.. "Toni Morrison's Ghost: The Beloved Who Is Not Beloved". *Studies in American Fiction*. 18 (Spring 1990), 17-26.

in the guilt and lived with it and her fierce possessiveness of Denver is the individualised response to this guilt.

Sethe's sensitivity makes her take upon herself the responsibility of the pall of ostracization that fell upon their home '124'. She is also equally sensitive to the possibility of emotional renewal, of loving again. Beloved gradually revives the feelings that Sethe had buried away in Beloved's tombstone. And as Ann said to Sethe moments before Denver's birth, 'anything dead coming back to life hurts' (B, 35). So also Sethe's heart. She wants to start afresh with Beloved. It is as if Sethe wants to bring the world anew, alive to her daughter, acquaint her with the colours, smells and sounds, all of which had gone numb in her till Beloved came back.

Sethe's love for her daughter is illustrated in a zealous guard over her. It is as if she does not want to lose her again. Morrison shows that nature takes its course and for a person like Sethe who loved intensely she also needed to struggle and fight for her Beloved. The daughter's sense of betrayal acquires horrendous proportions. Gradually, Beloved begins to appropriate and completely control a frantic Sethe, unable to envisage a time when Beloved would leave her again. Sethe had been rejuvenated emotionally by Beloved because all that had gone numb in her had come back to life. It is through Beloved that Sethe had begun to actually see Denver as an individual. The moment of the three iceskating is rendered in an authorial voice and is a significant strategic move. It establishes the climax of emotional rapport shared between them and that is also the moment when Sethe is

shown to realise that Beloved is indeed her slain daughter come back for her mother's love.

From this point the narrative is rendered in third person declarative authorial voice. Morrison's concern is to establish the volte face in the experience, to show how Sethe, the killer, could also become a victim in the hands of the one slain by her. The idea being established is that Sethe could be manipulated and happily so because she loves Beloved so much. The element in her nature that made her choose to kill her daughter was making her choose again to accept the torture and the deprivation brought on by Beloved. Therefore, Morrison shows the cyclical nature of an experience. Sethe does emerge as a woman capable of love even after being branded as a 'child killer'. Yet, the very nature of her love for the slain child becomes an expression of her emotional individuality. Consequently, Morrison does not focus only on moments which humanise perceptions of Sethe. Beloved's first person accounts and shift into Beloved's consciousness are the writer's effort to show the complexity inlaid into the experience of others too which also highlights the inadequacy of perceptions seeing Sethe as evil.

Therefore, when the narrative moves into an authorial description of the moment of slaying, Sethe has been shown to the reader as a woman capable of great love and affection. By this time the act of killing does not acquire primacy. It becomes a point for initiating an exploration of Sethe's individuality and her instincts as an individual. There is so much more to her and this becomes evident because Sethe's moments of humanity are

rendered in first person.

Morrison engages narrative shifts to highlight responses that are crucial to her vision of the experience of motherhood. Sethe's humanity comes through in her first person responses like "no notebook for my babies and no measuring string neither" (B, 198). Still, Beloved had come back to Sethe of 'her own free will and [I] don't have to explain a thing' (B, 200). Rendered in first person the voice shift is Morrison's effort to redefine what it means to be a mother and still affirm the humanity of the mother who has been charged for infanticide. Sethe did not justify because she was sure Beloved would understand. The narrative technique of first person account highlights the nature of Sethe's love for her child. It illustrates the feelings that she has for her "dearly beloved".

It is specially significant for Sethe because no one had really understood her emotional state. The society had maligned and ostracized her. None of it mattered to Sethe. She had never been the one to care much for seeking approval from others. Sethe had chosen always to do what she saw as right. She had chosen Halle out of all the Sweet Home men because his love and sacrifice for Baby Suggs was not something common in the slaves' world that Sethe lived in. Sethe chose to send away her children to freedom. She knew she would have to do it alone and she did it. All that she was sure of was that no one could take away her babies, created in love and who were beauty personified for her.

Sethe had chosen to go against the prevailing codes for slaves and also the accepted norms of ideal motherhood within her

own community. Still, Sethe had carried herself with the righteousness of the wronged one, not caring to break the wall of ostracization. But Beloved was her daughter. Sethe had done everything for her. She had killed to save her. At least she should understand. Sethe was sure that Beloved would. Her call to Beloved for understanding is actually an endorsement of Morrison's view that Sethe was a mother, though not the kind who sought approbation from society. She had not done so for choosing a husband. Therefore, when it came to her children she knew she was the one who thought most of their welfare, and needed no prescription from the community.

Sethe, in the eyes of the society, is a child killer but Morrison shows otherwise. Her capacity to love unconditionally is never more poignantly manifested than in Sethe's message to Beloved, "Think what spring will be for us!" (B,201). Sethe begins to make plans for the spring. Nothing could be more heartrending than a mother planning a life with the ghost of her slain daughter. The doomed nature of spring is laid within the plan itself. But, nothing can stop Sethe. "Because [you] are [mine] and [I] have to show [you] these things, and teach you what a mother should" (B, 201). There is still hope in Sethe that spring will be seen by Beloved too. A deadened hope but nevertheless a hope. The first person narrative technique helps to build up the impression of Sethe's genuine maternal instincts and shows the hollowness of the censoring social glances of those who condemn Sethe and are somewhere happy that the slain daughter's ghost had come back for revenge. Who else but Sethe

could make plans for a dead daughter? Only Sethe, because for her loving the child meant nourishing not only her body but her mind as well. That is what a mother should "teach" her child, to develop "inward eyes" and 'be on the lookout' (B, 201) always. It was this feeling which had prompted Sethe to kill her daughter. She knew, as a slave, the ignominy awaiting her daughter's future as a slave. Sethe did not want that her child's mind should be sullied because of the indignities of slavery. Nothing could be saved from slavery but Sethe wanted to save her children. She wanted to save their souls, their minds, their hearts from the clutches of slavery.

Sethe was a mother, no doubt, but one who saw motherhood as a state of providing nourishment to their minds. Her plans for Beloved include giving her the ability to feel everything. The emphasis in Sethe is on forming Beloved's mind. Perhaps the conspicuous absences of mention of the body are references to the reader on the reality of the situation, something of which Sethe too is aware at an unconscious level.

The onslaught of slavery is not only on the body but more ruinously on the minds and souls of the enslaved. This is the crux of Sethe's concern as a mother. She wanted to save the spirit of her children from the crushing degradation of bondage. What she feared was the gradual dehumanizing of all their instincts till even the will to think is eliminated. This is Sethe's concern and the emotional implications of her thought and action are connected to the emotional lives of others as well. **Beloved** is as much about Sethe's slain daughter as it is about the

lives of those who were not slain by their mothers but whose lives were not any better. Enslavement eats into the vitals of each instinct and the lives of those around Sethe were evidence of the emotional impoverishment and spiritual decay and that was of utmost concern to her. Sethe wanted to save her children from such a life.

Sethe was "keeping the past at bay" after the death of her daughter. With Denver she had a fiercely possessive feeling because her physical well being somehow was connected to her inner guilt and sorrow. But, it is only with the coming of Beloved that Sethe also realises the emotional needs of Denver. So, in a way the presence of her past helps Sethe to renew connections with the present from a changed perspective. This contrast in perceptions helps to highlight the nature of motherhood. Morrison shows that nurturing is crucial for the mind, as much as it is for, or perhaps even more, than the body. Sethe, in contrast to the concern for Denver, plans to nourish not the 'body' but the mind of Beloved. The contrast in her concerns and her gradual realisation for Denver as well shows the significance of seeing motherhood not as a physical state but as a state of spiritual preparedness for nourishing the soul of the child.

In Walker's novel, Meridian's decision to give away her child is spurred by her recognition that spiritual violation of the child is much more harmful. She had been the victim of violation of her spirit. She endured the label of 'monster' given by her mother because she wanted to save her son 'from her ownself' (M, 90). Meridian was different from her mother in this aspect. She

did not see motherhood as a physical condition like her mother. She wanted to save her son from the spiritual dismemberment that had marred her own childhood. The nature of change in perceptions of motherhood - from Meridian's mother to Meridian - would have gained in depth if the narrative would have shown some awareness of the fate of Meridian's son. The reader would like to know if he had fared any better than the fears of his mother, Meridian. Meridian's decision to flout the ideals of Black Motherhood could be tested only if a contrastive description had been given of Meridian's childhood with that of her son's childhood.

Since it is absent, the novel loses impact in totality. The third person narrative technique with barely disguised authorial voice does not illuminate the inner lives of Meridian's mother or Meridian's son. The absence of insight into their lives affects the portrayal of Meridian as well. If Walker had provided a parallel evidence of Meridian's son's life then Meridian's decision would have acquired greater significance. Also, then it would be possible to support from experiential evidence the relevance of seeing motherhood in terms of emotional readiness than a physical state of being.

In *Beloved*, by showing nurturing as an instinct rather than as an institution, Morrison augurs the change in Paul D's perceptions as well. He recognises finally that Sethe "is a friend of [my] mind. She gather [me]. The pieces [I] am, she gather them and give them back to [me] in/all the right order" (B, 272-73). *Beloved's* coming had helped Sethe to gather the pieces of her self showing the inadequacy of seeing love as conditional



only to physical presence. The gathering together of self had made it possible for Paul D also to recognise the nature of love. It could not be 'too much' or 'too less'. It was just love and Sethe epitomized such love. She really was a 'friend' of his 'mind' because she helped to nourish his soul which had been sealed tight in a 'tin box'. What is shown is that Sethe's perception of what is important in a relationship influences her response to Paul D. Showing the possibility of change in Paul D, one of the many whose soul had been damaged because of slavery, shows with greater strength the relevance of Sethe's decision. She chose to free her children because she did not want them to have a 'lid' on their heart or a 'bit' on their tongues. Sethe was a different kind of mother but it is shown that her difference in approach actually holds a sensitive and caring individual capable of changing the lives of those who touch her own life. She differed because she wanted to choose.

Such a capability is shown in *Meridian* but it does not emerge organically from the experience itself. Her different perception of motherhood emerges from a struggle to carve another definition of selfhood. Both strands are interconnected but become separate themes in the novel. This is because the impact of her decision is rendered in terms which do not succeed in grasping the totality of experience. *Meridian* is described in authorial tones, as having affection for Wild Child, for children, for Camara but when it comes to showing the change in Truman and Lynne the narrative becomes over-strident. Paul D in *Beloved* is shown to change and there is evidence to prove that he can because he is like any

other human being capable of responding to a genuine gesture. But, Truman's glowing praise of Meridian as the novel ends has a touch of artificiality in it. This is because the narrative has not given adequate representation of complexity in his nature which would make the change feasible. Truman recognises the validity of Meridian's stance that 'one need never kill' (M,139). But, the reader is not able to accept the change because experiential evidence is missing. Walker's singular focus to apotheosise Meridian results in declarative assertions in describing responses of other people in the novel. As a result of the limited insight afforded by third person accounts the significance of Meridian's perceptions on motherhood also pale in comparison. What emerges is more a narrative in which one idea is replaced by another, that of Meridian's. An effort exploring the inadequacy of the existing notions would have given strength to Meridian's perspective and a complex wholeness to the experience.

*Beloved* becomes a more satisfying rendering of the changing perceptions of motherhood in comparison with *Meridian*. *Beloved* allows for the change in perceptions to influence the reader at a more basic and universal plane than *Meridian*. This happens because Morrison, unlike Walker, is not aiming solely to glorify the female protagonist. *Beloved* shows Sethe's humanity without negating its presence in others who are also affected by the inadequacy of existing perceptions on their experience. Morrison shows significance of the stance of Sethe, even as Walker upholds Meridian's decisions. Yet, unlike Walker, Morrison shows the complexity of experience to be such that elevation of only Sethe would have meant telling only part of the story.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE INDIVIDUAL AS QUESTOR : SEARCH FOR CONNECTIONS

The specific socio-political dimensions of Afro-American experience have possibly created the view that the theme of quest is basic to its literary tradition. The mode of quest by its very nature is seen to be a convincing literary theme for delineating the crisis of identities in Afro-American experience. The theme of quest is considered crucial for an understanding of the real nature of Afro-American experience.

The significance of the quest theme for providing insights into the Afro-American experience is undeniable. Nevertheless, other kinds of experiential crisis have also been explored through the theme. In fact, a basic principle of the theme is to question the nature of dissatisfaction about an experience. An individual questions his or her existing life situation if a feeling of discontentment exists and also an awareness that an alternative life situation can be created. A quest is undertaken to make possible a more meaningful realisation for self which validates its relevance as an important experiential theme in imaginative literature of any life situation.

For an Afro-American as well, the process of negotiation for selfhood involves questioning the situation specific to the black community in America. An Afro-American has to create a workable identity for himself or herself only after he or she has reached some inner solution in relation to the society as a whole. To do this has meant negotiation with one's situation of marginality in the white society. This condition of marginality is doubled in

the case of black women. The black feminist sees the black woman's crisis of identity to be exacerbated due to the twin factors of racism and sexism. Consequently, a black woman's crisis of identity is seen in terms of a quest which finally leads to rejection, not only of 'white', but also of 'male' created norms of living.

A universalist perception however, unlike the black feminist's, sees the black woman's need for self realisation to be similar to the need of any individual who desires to seek some answers to his or her life. It is this search which characterises the theme of quest in black women's literary tradition as well. From the earliest of slave narratives by ex-female slaves to the writings of contemporary Afro-American women writers, the focus has been consistently on drawing the different emotional configurations of quest for identity and selfhood. The effort has been to transcribe in the fictional medium some semblance of the ambivalence intrinsic to their experience. No quest takes place without assessment of one's existing situation and reviewing reasons for discontentment. This naturally means an assessment of the nature of experience and response in the past because that is what makes for the present and creates a referential basis for a need to change it. For an Afro-American writer too a representation of the experience of transition is incomplete without looking into the nature of past that goes into making the totality of the experience. The crisis of identity has meant reassessment of the present and rechecking the past, both in individual and communal terms. The need for connection is seen by

writers as the crux of an Afro-American's quest. Yet, what is not very clearly defined and undergoes symbolic transformations in literary representation is the form of these connections. The notion of a composite, insulated black community and its past has been explored differently by individual writers.

It is of interest to see the way in which the nature of a writer's response to the element of past influences the portrayal of the questors. The writer's response to the past influences the possible creation of a multivalent or a monolithic perception of the notion of quest itself. The crisis of identity for an Afro-American and its resolution means for some writers a journey to the past, to the notion of black being beautiful and better. On the other hand there is a possibility of seeing experience itself as a flux whereby temporal categories are seen as inadequate and what is emphasised is the presence of ambivalence since it is not possible to point out the exact moment in life when the past is left behind. 'Past', 'present' or 'future' are categories constructed for convenience since actually each moment is distilled out of all three aspects in an experience.

The nature of a writer's perception of the past influences delineation of the quest. Alice Walker and Toni Morrison also explore the nature of experience in relation to the theme of quest. Though all their novels are concerned with the questioning of existing perceptions on woman's experience, in some novels the idea of quest as a journey, both in physical and emotional terms, is specifically explored. Alice Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and Toni Morrison's novels *Song of Solomon* (1977)

and *Tar Baby* (1981) are compared in this chapter to show the individual perceptions of both writers on the nature of an individual's quest for self realisation.

The focus of this chapter is to show how individual perception of the past influences the rendering of journeys of the questors. This perspective is seen as important because search for selfhood has been translated specifically for the Afro-American in terms of connections with the black community's past. Therefore, the writer's perception of the notion of the past indicates her insight into the nature of experience itself. Both novelists show in their novels an awareness that an inner sense of alienation is the starting point for an individual's quest towards selfhood. They see the presence of an ancestral figure as essential in guiding an individual towards the state of self realisation. These ancestral presences are manifestations of integrated selves, ones who create in the alienated individual an awareness of his or her inauthenticity.

The analysis of the theme of quest as it figures prominently in the novels of Walker and Morrison shows the difference in their portrayal of the ancestral presences, who in two novels - *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Song of Solomon* are women. These women provide the emotional impetus to the alienated individuals for undertaking the quest. It is in the rendering of the relationship between the ancestral figure and the questor that comparative insights can be drawn into the visions of the novelists towards the element of the past in an experience.

Though the narrative moves from the experiential well-springs

of the questor's search, actually the novelists are concerned to highlight the ancestor's approach to life. The perspective of life enunciated by the ancestral presence provides insight into the novelist's view of the nature and the aim of an individual's quest for connections. The focus on the relationship between the ancestor and the alienated individual underlines the terms in which the quest is conceptualised. It shows the nature of connections which are seen to be significant in an individual's search for selfhood. The ancestral figures are therefore points of reference in the novels because it is through them that the novelists express their approach to an Afro-American individual's search for roots.

Search for roots is crucial in the three novels selected for analysis. This means that in the nature of response to the past, in an individual's and the community's experience, lies the novelists' nature of response to the Afro-American experience. The novels are individual journeys, both in the physical and spiritual senses. The movement in the narratives, as shown in the chapter, is a movement in the perception of the past within an individual and simultaneously within a community. The universalist perspective sees in these three novels a development of the perception of the past. This development is organised on a linear scale in the chapter to highlight the significance of the complexity in the experience which is recreated through a specific perception of the past. The movement as is shown here indicates a possible growth of ideas which do not see 'past' as a static, one dimensional entity. As a consequence the experience of being an

Afro-American is also shown to be conceived in complex and humane terms.

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The first impression that a reader has of *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* and *The Temple of My Familiar* is that they are journeys made by individuals who are alienated from their situations.

The growth of relationship with the ancestral figures brings to the alienated individuals a sharp realisation of their spiritual dissipation. The ancestral figure's connection and acceptance with the past of one's self contributes to the sense of spiritual integrity and authenticity emanating from them. The ancestors, unlike the alienated individuals, have recognised, accepted and shaped a connective life principle for themselves.

Pilate is the overwhelming ancestral presence in *Song of Solomon*. She provides for her nephew Milkman's alienated consciousness an alternative perception of life. It is Pilate's inner sense of mooring despite the absence of a physical centre - absence of a navel - which confirms that connectedness is a state of mind. Pilate's vision strengthens Morrison's view that connections have to be made within one's self and not by adopting self-conscious postures, like going back to Africa or holding up 'the black way of living'.

Ms. Lissie is the ancestral presence in *The Temple of My Familiar* who highlights the inadequacy of Suwelo's perceptions and brings home to him the need for a change in them. Her connection with the past is at the most fundamental level of human and animal life. She is the 'one who remembers everything'. It is through



her that not only the community's but the human civilization's past is revealed to Suwelo. The purpose of the recall is to make evident the falseness in Suwelo's perceptions which have created alienation in him.

*Tar Baby* has an alienated female who is at the experiential centre of the novel. Jadine's sense of alienation is similar in nature to that of Milkman and Suwelo since it springs out of the inability to accept responsibility of one'sself. It is in the rendering of the progression of their individual quests that the difference in the perception of the past is illustrated. This indicates that the focus in the novels is to delineate specifically experience of the alienated individuals. The women in the yellow dress provides the alternative life vision to Jadine in her condition of alienation.

The novels show that authenticity in the ancestral presences emerges out of their conscious rejection of society's norms. The process of shaping their selves has involved a questioning of the society's codes of conduct and the norms of right or wrong. In many ways the ancestors have been social rebels who dared to create their own norms for living. Pilate represents a life principle starkly opposed to that of her brother Macon. The relevance of Pilate's life principle is pointed at by showing the contrast in Pilate and Macon's views towards their past, towards their childhood, the memories of their lives together and the community that they had left behind. Both have seen the slaying of their father by whites, the consequent loss of their town and their people. Deprived of everything, exiled even from their

home, Macon and Pilate have had to remake their priorities in life.

Macon's great ambition is to forget the 'past' which meant to him loss and poverty, and 'own things' instead so as to work up to an enviable position in comparison with other blacks. In stark contrast to the ambitions of Macon is his sister Pilate whose very name symbolises evil in the Biblical sense. Her physical dispossession of a navel marks her out as an outsider of sorts, one who is not within the hallowed circle of society. Pilate, unlike Macon, does not discard her past but claims it in her own way. In fact, her connection with it begins right with her desire, and success, in folding up the piece of paper bearing her name written by her illiterate father and safekeeping it in a box which dangled from her ear. She begins her inner journey of integration by accepting her past and in the process recognises that sanctity for human relationships was to be the basis of her life principle.

Macon and Pilate therefore posit divergent life principles in relation to the nature of significance attributed by them to their past. Pilate's decision to possess nothing but sanctity of human relationships conveys Morrison's concern to give an individualised dimension to the notion of the 'past' in an experience.

Pilate is seen as a contrastive presence against Macon's hard broiled materialistic presence. Yet, by showing the nature of Macon's relationship not only with family, his community but also his own self, Morrison is showing the dehumanising consequences of rejecting one's past, of disowning the evidence of one's actions

and desires. In contrast, Pilate while dispossessed of everything materialistic is actually the one who is completely integrated into the circle of human relationships.

At the plane of the community's experience, the notion of past has been that it was unspoiled by the corrupting influence of white bourgeois value system. Such a view of the past of black community assumes that it exists as a static, unified structure out there. In *Song of Solomon* the notion of the past is not seen in contrastive reference to a black value system. Past is actually seen more in terms of being responsible to self and one's own experience. Past is seen as an evidence of the moment of evasion or recognition of one's responsibility for safeguarding the life of another. The evidence of the past actually highlights the moments of individual responsibility bypassed by Macon but recognised by Pilate.

This contrast in terms of a sense of responsibility is seen in reference to Macon's son Milkman. Milkman is shown to be an alienated individual, not experiencing any sense of connections with anyone. His consciousness is shown to voice these thoughts immediately after Macon warns him that Pilate is a snake. "She can teach you nothing of worth for this world. Come with me. Own things. Own more things which can own more things"<sup>1</sup> (SOS, 55). The idea being built up in voicing Milkman's dissatisfaction is to emphasise that, finally, Macon's success in owning things has not

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<sup>1</sup>All references to *Song of Solomon* (1977) pertain to the Chatto and Windus edition (1978) given parenthetically in the text and abbreviated as SOS.

ensured satisfaction and a sense of emotional wholeness for his son Milkman.

Milkman's decision to break off with Hagar, Pilate's granddaughter, is a result of this state of spiritual ennui. At this point the narrative moves into the past to recall an incident in which Pilate threatens the life out of a man when she found him beating her daughter, Reba. To insert this incident at this point is to show to the readers the strength of feeling possessed by Pilate towards her family. It is in keeping with this feeling of terror that the anticipated attack by a jilted Hagar is recreated in the novel. But this never happens. Yet, Milkman can utter "Die Hagar, Die" because it is either "you or me" (SOS, 122). Nothing wrong with that. It is a survival cry except that it is voiced by Milkman at a point which damns him most. It has already been shown through a view of the past that it was Pilate who actually saved him even before his birth. The revelation is made accessible immediately before showing Hagar's planned attack on Milkman. Ruth's version of the past describing her own nature, needs, relationship with her own father and her husband Macon provides another view to Milkman's lament of dissatisfaction. An earlier version of the same experience by Macon had painted Ruth as a pervert having a sleazy relationship with her father. Perhaps the past can be perceived differently by different people. Nevertheless, the shift into Milkman's consciousness for recalling Ruth's version described in her own voice highlights the genuineness of her view. It is highlighted more so by Milkman's wish, 'Die, Hagar, Die' which brings out the utter selfishness in

his perception. Most significantly, the recall is intended to show that Pilate is part of the past which has in all senses been disowned by her brother Macon and evaded by his son Milkman.

Pilate was the one actually involved in making possible his safe arrival despite Macon's violent methods of resistance. It is in terms of individual responses to situations that it is brought out who is actually dispossessed - Macon or Pilate. The manner of bringing forth this perception is such that the nature of contrast between Pilate and Macon's vision of life is developed more in terms of a distinctive individual response rather than clash of white and black culture.

Immediately after this the narrative moves into Ruth's consciousness recalling the exact nature of Pilate's help - by advice, actual help and even by black magic - to Ruth and tactics employed on Macon to dissuade him from getting the baby aborted. This is an important point, and articulated through Ruth's narrating consciousness it heightens the significance of Pilate. She is actually a bearer of the past in as much as she has through willed actions made a difference, in fact made Milkman's existence possible at all. Perhaps Pilate's actions are her way to remain connected to the past disowned by Macon.

Pilate is seen as an ancestral figure confident in self knowledge and responsible for her past. The perception of the past in the novel shows it as a series of evidences which help to bring out the integrity of Pilate and the falseness of Macon. The notion of an individual's past is not fixed. There can be different views of the same incident but the structuring of the

narrative highlights the significance of the perception held by Pilate.

One journey had been undertaken by Macon and Pilate out of their home town. Another journey is taken back into it by Milkman. The aim initially is to search for the gold that Macon and Pilate had left in the cave. Yet, gradually the journey, the people, his own responses make Milkman recognise the falsity in his claims that "he didn't deserve this .... that he deserved something better" (SOS, 276). This was the notion with which Macon had begun his journey from his home and he sent Milkman back with the same perception. Gradually, Milkman recognises the inadequacy of the view bred in him by Macon and begins to search for connections with families in order to grow as an integrated self. Some where the life principle of Macon is exchanged by Pilate's view, "You can't take a life and walk off and leave it" (SOS, 208). The idea being developed is not in terms of white against black value system. Pilate represents the past as an evidence of actions taken by an individual from an inner sense of responsibility and connectedness.

It is not only as a bearer of the past that Pilate is portrayed. The idea is more to show that the experience in 'past' is not fixed but is made up of possibilities of different versions. It is just that it happens to be in the nature of the experience in the novel that revelation of the past cannot be done in isolation from Pilate. She is in fact a major participant in shaping Milkman's present. It is in terms of a sense of individual responsibility in each individual, and not only Macon,

that the experience in the past is perceived. Importantly, the significance of Pilate in shaping Milkman's thinking is created because her integrity creates an impact. Unlike Ruth's and Hagar's acquisitive affection for Milkman, Pilate is never shown to have loved him possessively. Pilate does not experience emotional insecurity and therefore does not need to hold on to people. Such an approach to life is not specifically characteristic of the values of the white society, it is human and is present within the black community too. At such experiential junctures Pilate is shown to differ not only from Macon's view of ownership of property but also from Ruth's view of appropriating an individual's emotions.

Pilate's view on such kind of acquisitiveness is revealed when Ruth goes to meet Pilate or Hagar in order to stop Hagar from attacking Milkman. It is significant that from an authorial recording of the meeting and narration of tension between Hagar and Ruth, the narrative moves into a dialogical voice of Pilate calling them "fools", for fighting over a human being as if he were "a piece of property". This is an explicit evidence of Pilate view. A more subtle way is created immediately after. Pilate begins her life story in first person but right in the middle, the narrative shifts to an authorial documentation. Morrison's perception of experience as a flux is illustrated here. Pilate's condition is being seen as a movement natural to experience so that it can be retold and revoiced. Pilate is not like Hagar nor like Milkman's sister Corinthians. Hagar exemplifies a view towards life that thrives on acquisition of the

loved one while Corinthians provides an example of the impact on the self esteem of Macon's children due to the principle of ownership espoused by him.

Pilate is a bearer of the past in as much as she indicates the ability to be linked to others without appropriative attachment. She is a bearer of the past also in the sense that one's will can change one's given situation like that of Pilate and turn it into something completely different. Morrison conveys the malleable quality of 'past' by showing different views on one moment. Also, Pilate's strength to shape a present different from the evidence of the past confirms the changing nature of experience. The change, as is shown, comes out of a willed sense of responsibility. Milkman's death - in fact is a willed jump into death, a final flight, but not away from commitment. Pilate's murder by Guitar demolishes the validity of Guitar's vindictive concerns about the life of a black man. Neither Macon nor Guitar can give Milkman an enduring life principle. It is an alien - a symbolic outcast - who initiates in him the integration within and the corresponding sense of responsibility for one's actions that had been absent in Guitar as well as Macon. In his willed flight into death, Milkman asserts his commitment and shows that evidences from the past are essential for starting a process of self exploration, and possibly a sense of connectedness. Thus, the past may be seen here as a part of experience seen differently by different people but the moral vision of the novel upholds the significance of Pilate's response to the experience. Also, the notion of the past is not seen as fixed in the light of Milkman's



final effort to shape the self in the present by gathering knowledge from the past.

Like Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*, the moral vision of Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* centers around a female ancestor Ms. Lissie. The experiential concerns symbolised in her are at an obvious level similar to those of *Song of Solomon*. Suwelo in Walker's novel is also shown to be experiencing a sense of disorientation like Milkman. There's an inner sense of being alienated. Like Pilate, Ms. Lissie is the ancestral presence whose life principle frees Suwelo's mind from the feeling of dissipation and alienation. Also, Suwelo's transition from one state of mind to another is drawn as a quest. He meets Ms. Lissie as a disembodied individual but gradually through her builds up links within and without.

The possibility of quest is here too shown in relation to the exploration of the past in the experience. The element of the past is crucial here too. In fact, more so because the nature of Suwelo's transition process is marked by a continuous series of recall and opening of memory strands. Ms. Lissie in fact is known as "the one who remembers". It is in the most fundamental sense of the term that she is an ancestral presence. She remembers everything, not only the past of the black community, but the past of the entire human civilization. As in *Song of Solomon* the notion of the significance of the past in shaping the alienated lives in the present is stressed by Walker. In that sense too, past in *The Temple of My Familiar* is shown to have significant role in shaping the present but it is in the notion of 'past',

'present' or 'future' as fixed categories that the contrast in Walker's view the vision of Morrison is underlined.

It is changeable in as much as a similar incident could be seen in different patterns of significance. In *Song of Solomon* the notion of the past was one of change but the change was in moving towards acceptance of Pilate's vision of life. To that end the narrative in *Song of Solomon* was structured so as to reveal different aspects of the same incident in the past but it was done at a point which highlighted the validity of Pilate's perspective opposed to the one espoused by Macon or Guitar. Similarly, the vision of life represented by Ms. Lissie is the singular point to which each experiential strand is joined in *The Temple of My Familiar*.

The difference in the portrayal of the women as bearers of the past begins from this point onwards. *Song of Solomon* showed that not only women but men too were bearers of the past, as experience in the present could be defined only in reference to the past. The experience was developed to show that Pilate's vision of life had endurance. This emphasis was not made by showing men as the ones who were alienated. In as much as Ruth symbolised the acquisitive view to human relationships, she was like Macon. So, the concern is to show more the viability or its absence in one kind of life principle.

In contrast, Ms. Lissie, as the bearer of the past - of an individual, a community, the human and the animal race - is also somewhat opposed to the acquisitive life principle. Still, the manner in which the experience is rendered shows that the

acquisitive attitude towards life is not common but specific to, and characteristic of men and of the white social culture. Women, Walker emphasises, in the novel, have always been the ones to suffer and endure. Ms. Lissie's ancestral presence is intended to place the oppression of black women within a broader perspective. Consequently, the insights emerging from points of recall of the past are ones which uphold the 'womanist' concerns of Walker. The process of remembrance illustrates that women hold the key to the survival of the black community. Her concerns are manifested in her perception of the element of 'past' inlaid into the present experience. Ms. Lissie's remembrances form the basis of a vision which is intended as complete. It is in reference to Ms. Lissie's vision that Suwelo's sense of alienation is resolved. Before the end of the first section Suwelo is narrating, to Ms. Lissie and her husband, his wife Fanny's wish, not to remain married to him. The significance of Suwelo's acceptance in the beginning that he had done wrong to her and Carlotta is highlighted at this point. The relevance of Suwelo's self realisation is brought out in the novel through references to the trauma of slavery borne by black women and retold by Ms. Lissie. The recall into the past is done to show the nature of trauma endured by women which validates Walker's 'womanist' philosophy. Suwelo's recall of Fanny's wish expressed after the recall of the black woman's bondage in slavery is intended to join history with the present and convey the continuing struggle of women against the shallowness of men like Suwelo. Suwelo's wrong done to Carlotta is not revealed at this point but what is

revealed is Carlotta's painful memories of her husband Arveyda. This insight into Carlotta's experience shows that she too had undergone a traumatic priod.

This is the first example of what is seen as significant in the experience. Ms. Lissie's tales of the past reveal the connections with the lives of other women. The idea is to show that connections exist and that is why not only Ms. Lissie but all women are seen as bearers of the community's past and the past of an individual. Unlike the novel *Song of Solomon*, here in *The Temple of My Familiar*, the past is seen not as evidence of actions of all but as evidence of the oppressive actions of males and whites inflicted on women through the ages. The past is seen as a witness of actions - exploitative actions of males and whites - against women. It is seen as a witness different from the notion of the past as witness as shown in *Song of Solomon* where an individual - Pilate - through an active sense of responsibility reveals the constantly evolving nature of experience, whether in the past or in the present. The past is a witness in *The Temple of My Familiar* of oppression against women.

Fanny's wish is explainable not only because of the historical, broader evidence from the past about exploitation of women. It is her wish for self definition which affects the delineation of the past of an individual and a community. This is brought out by the shift in the narrative into the first person account of Fanny's mother Olivia of her life, her childhood and the influences on her. When Fanny conveys in the next section her emotional distance from Olivia the reason can be seen in clearer

terms because of the insight into the record of her life as well. Fanny's purchase of a pushcart is nothing significant but it is revealed through Suwelo's consciousness at a point when the possibility of her sense of disembodiment cannot be ruled out. Her need to define what is significant in her experience leads Fanny on to the trip with Olivia to Africa. The idea is to show that making the present an evolving part of the past is crucial. Suwelo's role in aggravating Fanny's chaos is made clear by showing Fanny's struggles in the past and Suwelo's lack of understanding. Into this chaos is brought in coherence through the assessment of experience embedded within Ms. Lissie's tale. Fanny is shown to have gathered her strength back and the narrative shows that it is on account of joining her destiny with shared experiences of her mother and that of her half sister.

Suwelo's cry that his wife is "seeing a shrink" is baseless against the significant idea that her state of inner distress requires a point of clarification. In fact, Suwelo is shown to be responsible for a substantial damage to Fanny. The change is brought out by evidence of his growing apart from Fanny. Suwelo too is shown to be living with the notion of self innocence. It is through Mr. Lissie's tales of recall that Suwelo's actual complicity is highlighted and his shallowness exposed to him.

When Carlotta is accused by Suwelo of having "no substance"<sup>2</sup> (TTOMF, 237) it has been conveyed immediately before in another

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<sup>2</sup>All references to *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) pertain to the H.B. Jovanovich edition (1989) given parenthetically in the text and abbreviated as TTOMF.

narrative context the travails undergone by her and Zede, her mother. The torturous history of Zede is amplified through first person account of Mary Jane's aunt, the changes in her and the process by which she reaches the point of insight to help Zede and Carlotta. The past of Mary Jane and her aunts is described to show the line of connection between the black woman's oppression and the dehumanising structure of an imperialistic society. Only an individual who was able to accept the burden of the past could help another individual as Ms. Lissie did for Suwelo.

The idea is to show the change in Suwelo through Ms. Lissie's ancestral wisdom. She is a bearer of the past in as much as she makes Suwelo see the immense struggle and pain endured by the women in the past. It is through her assessment of what led to the damage in the past that Suwelo begins to question 'what do human beings contribute?' (TTOMF, 89). His sense of complacency is shaken and he recognises the need to go back and join Fanny in 'strugglehood' (TTOMF, 322) and acknowledge to Carlotta his callousness.

The idea has been all along to bring Suwelo to a point of realisation when he sees himself guilty and responsible for his actions towards others. Milkman in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* too recognises the harm he had done to Hagar and rushes back. Hagar's death before Milkman's arrival is intended to strengthen Milkman's resolve to integrate finally with Pilate's perspective. Hagar's death becomes the point for conflict and actually also the point of resolution marking the journey undertaken by Pilate and Milkman back to hometown to finally bury Pilate's father's bones. In a

way, the return is intended to individualise the response without making it an acceptance of black values or rejection of white value system. It is possible to do so because the notion of the past is not developed in terms of one social order against another. A similar situation is evident in Suwelo's need in the *Temple of My Familiar* to make peace with Fanny and Carlotta. This recognition of his own complicity does not create in Suwelo a perception of the past as a continuously evolving element but it is more in terms of making amends with a view of experience which glorifies the 'PAST' of the black community as a static entity.

It is difficult to claim that what was shown in the past at one point and the responses to it would always be the same. The past in *The Temple of My Familiar* is shown to be constituted always of similar kinds of responses because the concern is to show that all women share the history of pain and oppression. The representation of the history, the 'past' of each woman's life is shown to be frozen at a certain point. It is through a constant initiation of Ms Lissie's guidelines that the doors are opened and revelations made on the nature of oppression inflicted on women in the past. Consequently, the responses that are evoked require that the past must be seen as a witness of the wrongs done to women. In that sense, Ms. Lissie is a bearer of the community's past with a difference. She's articulating the untold, undisclosed story of the women's history of 'strugglehood'.

Pilate and Ms. Lissie are presences who embody a certain perception of the past. Through them Morrison and Walker convey their own perceptions about the element of the past in an

experience. Their vision is embodied in the life principles manifested in the actions of Pilate and Ms. Lissie.

Jadine's situation in *Tar Baby* is different. The notion of the past in *Song of Solomon* was that it was present as a witness of the life affirming vision of Pilate in contrast to the acquisitive principles of life embodied in Macon and Ruth. The absence of individual responsibility is shown to be the consequence of an appropriating philosophy.

Ms. Lissie's presence shows that these moments of the responsibility were absent only in the attitudes of males and whites. In both novels, the past is an evidence but there is a difference. Ms. Lissie provides the defining point of broader perception which gives evidence from the past. In Pilate's case, differing from Ms. Lissie, the ancestral presence is part of the evidence. In fact her gesture of individual responsibility is intrinsic and inbuilt into the experience. Ms. Lissie's comments on the universal evidences do provide a framework for changing views but do not give a sense of individuality to her response. The individuality which pervades Pilate's presence and response to the past is absent in Ms. Lissie's remembrances. Consequently, though the reasons are there the rendering does not develop into an individualised and a convincing portrait. One has the feeling that there are two distinct strands - Ms. Lissie's remembrances and Suwelo's experiential predilections. The present as embodied in Suwelo is shown to be emotionally impoverished as far as providing some form of understanding of the past as embodied in Ms. Lissie.



A sense of emotional inauthenticity is most complexly grappled in Jadine's situation in Morrison's *Tar Baby*. It is in her predicament that the difficulty of seeing any one individual as bearer of the past is articulated. Jadine is actually seen as the alien, one who has become disenfranchised from the community. She is seen as the '*Tar Baby*', one who has become the carrier of white society's values. So, to all intents she is not a bearer of the community's past because she has accepted the values of those - whites - who have historically been the oppressors of the black community.

Nevertheless, Morrison sees in her situation a concrete possibility to emphasise the difficulty of seeing experience as static. *Tar Baby* too shelves the notion that the past remains unchanged and individual priorities are inextricably joined with a simplistic perception of the community. This is not so and Jadine's situation shows that the past is not something left behind. In fact, the ambivalent nature of experience in *Tar Baby* is intended to show that nothing is static, neither the past nor the present. Each flows into the other and is functional at every point of experience. The idea is to show that the past is not only a matter of evidence. The nature of Jadine's experience is such that even the evidence of the inauthenticity of response cannot augur any substantial changes in the responses. It seems that perception of the past is that it is not mainly an evidence but an experiential element in a continuous process of change and flow.

In *Tar Baby* Jadine is an alienated individual but awareness

of experiential dichotomy creates in her a complexity which is absent in the conditions of Milkman and Suwelo. In the traditional sense Jadine may not be seen as a bearer of the past. Still, in the sense of trying to show the protean nature of Afro-American woman's experience it is conveyed that perhaps Jadine embodies a more realistic view. In her experience is reposed a perception of the past which is not static and which indicates that in life choices are not made in clear cut terms. Such perceptions of the past illuminate the complex nature of Afro-American experience as a whole. For Jadine therefore as well as for Son, an understanding of the nature of their choices is crucial.

The choice is between Jadine's and Son's view of the past. While Jadine, like Macon, sees the past as something to be got away from, Son, like Pilate, holds on to the fraternity within himself. Yet, it is not a one to one similarity or contrast in their experiential crisis.

Unlike Pilate, Son is not shown to possess intrinsic qualities. Perhaps Morrison is trying to see the possibility of one who does not believe in the present but lacks the intrinsic qualities to connect with the past. The experience is revolving around the question : who is authentic ? Jadine or Son ? Whose is the correct perception of experience ? It is actually difficult to decide and that probably accounts for the open-ended nature of Jadine's quest. Perhaps it is not in the nature of her experience to simply choose between the past and the present and embark on a future. For Jadine, each moment is kneaded into

another making distinction not only difficult, but unrealistic. The scene where Son accuses Jadine of being a 'tar baby' highlights the complexity of experience. The underlying tension of physical attraction is palpable to both. Still, they choose to see the conflict mainly in terms of responses towards the past and the present. It is interesting to note that Jadine, immediately after the scene with Son remembers a childhood incident of seeing a bitch on heat and her spontaneous subsequent view had been never to let her own emotions show. It is significant that, articulated in her consciousness, the scene shows the aftermath of her feeling of physical attraction for Son. Yet, a few steps further her consciousness begins creating ways to tell her story, changing and editing it to elicit laughs from her friends in Paris. This reveals that Jadine's own responses are not unmixed.

Her complex responses are evident not only in her interaction with Son, but with her uncle and aunt and their white employers too. The question is why? It is perhaps in the nature of the experience and it is not only Jadine's experience but others' too.

The basic point of conflict in all relationships is the need to project one's own self as innocent and one's own view as the only correct one. This is evident both in *Song of Solomon* and in *The Temple of My Familiar* in the context of the quest of the alienated individual.

In *Tar Baby* it is not possible to say that any one person is the ancestral presence. Each individual is shown to be caught within unresolved conflicts. Perhaps this is more realistic, since it is very rare that one individual is resolving al

conflicts and becoming completely self sufficient. Pilate and Ms. Lissie are shown to have resolved their conflicts in the past and are examples of those rare presences who have risen above the petty desires of acquisition or enviousness.

The concern in *Song of Solomon* and in *The Temple of My Familiar* is more to make the past a point for affirmative reference. In *Tar Baby* the experience is perceived to highlight its innate ambivalence which may or may not be affirmative for all. So, not only Jadine but others are also seeing the world with their eyes and thinking that he or she did more than the other and perhaps deserved more. The feeling of self righteousness is present in everyone. In such a situation Jadine cannot be seen as the only alienated individual. As long as there exists a feeling of innocence of self, the tendency would be to see the other as guilty removing possibility of an inner clarity.

Son and Jadine's affair begins with the same kind of hope that was at the back of Valerian's mind when he marries Margaret. The hope is that one would be able to change the other in due course of time. What is ignored is that one is dealing with human beings. Such a perception of human relationships conveys that somewhere each one is seeing in the other a substitute for something. Margaret sees in Valerian security while for him she was the wave of freshness which would change his dreary corporate existence.

Likewise, Son could give Jadine the connections to her childhood while for Son it was a way to start thinking about a stable life. What is overlooked is that individuals have their

own perception from which they perceive a relationship. Each is responding to the present situation along with a parallel strand towards the past of one's experience also moving into the formulation of new ideas and attitudes. Somehow nothing is left behind. Everything moves along within oneself.

Jadine may see herself as one who has given up the 'medieval slave basket' (TB, 233)<sup>3</sup> but then why does the sight of the women in yellow dress unnerve her? The remembrance of that image comes to her in the narrative after she has been feted by the white society as a successful black model. Perhaps success has not actually given her emotional stability. It is significant that at this point Margaret and Valerian are also shown to move into the past in their consciousness. The sense of isolation felt by each one brings out the nature of conflict described earlier. In the garb of domestic conflict are actually feelings of betrayal, of one's own self being innocent and the partner guilty. The movement into their consciousness is intended to show the presence of the past in the nature of their responses towards each other in the present.

Jadine is thus part of an experiential situation in which it is no longer easy to extricate the past from the present. It is moving on a parallel scale and what is significant in Jadine's experience is to be seen as a conglomeration of the past and the present. The point of her conflict with Son arises from the same concern, to prove to each other that he/she is right in her

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<sup>3</sup>All references to *Tar Baby* (1981) pertain to the Signet edition (1983) given parenthetically in the text and abbreviated as TB.

perception of the past and the present. Son does not want to be part of the white society's norms of life, work and leisure. For him his original dime from the past is of greater value than all the money from Valerian to Jadine. He has no desire to let Jadine be a 'tar baby'. He wants her to be what his own mammas had been. The narrative brings out the impossibility and implausibility of such a suggestion.

In fact, his own responses are also not undiluted. It is important to see that Son's elaborate bath ritual in Jadine's bedroom on the island is described extensively. A subtle way, but an important one, to show that a man who hates everything belonging to the whites, should revel, choose and savour the enjoyment that luxury toiletries can give him. It is important because this scene comes after the one in which Son accuses Jadine of prostituting herself for the sake of whites and their goods. Another significant point of complexity is Son's conversation with Valerian in the greenhouse. Here Son is the stereotype incarnate of the blabbering, foolish nigger, changing not only his tone, his accent but even the range of his vocabulary. Perhaps the past is never quite got rid of and so it is a far fetched supposition that his original dime was all that he wanted.

Jadine may see in Son the possibility of combining white with black. The idea is not only to turn him into a white value system oriented professional. The idea is more to see in him a convenient, more amiable alter image for her to live with. For Jadine, the past has to be garnished with the present. She may not see herself as a typical mamma but there is no denying her

pleasure in reveling in her own physicality. The description of her enjoyment of the sealskin coat brings out this unacknowledged element of her self. At that point it is difficult to say who is primitive and who is civilized. Perhaps it is difficult to deduce response of an individual only from one angle of perception. The hollowness of her claims to being civilized in the immediately following scene with Son is brought out with the evidence of her response earlier.

The past is not fixed. It keeps changing contours of its significance. Jadine cannot be the bearer of the past that Son expects her to be. It is not possible since even for Son the past is not devoid of influences and responses shaped from within the present. So, obviously Jadine cannot force Son to dispose of the past because the past never went away. It haunts and comes back like the persistent cry of Michael from under the sink-lonely and terrified.

It is in that sense that the complexity of responses have to be understood. Once it is out in the open there's no shame. Valerian and Margaret are shown to be moving towards the point from which they had begun. Only now it is Margaret who feels she can change Valerian. For Valerian the revelation of Margaret's sadistic abuse of their son Michael brings to him the knowledge of his own culpability. He had not accepted his responsibility and not paid any attention to what went on, so that Michael's cry from under the sink became a whisper which shook him always in his dreams. The past never leaves. It changes forms. Jadine thinks she has left behind the past but actually she has moulded it to

become more pliable for her in the present. The absence of a sense of connection within her arises out of the response to the past. Jadine sees Valerian only as a fool and echoes, "Talk, shit-take none", the jargon of the yuppies who like every generation feel they are reforming the present, giving up the past. Actually, what is being done not only by Jadine but by each one is to bring the past into a manageable form to live within the present. Yet, conflict between Margaret and Valerian, Jadine and Son show that each would be a substitute for the other till one can accept one's own degree of participation, culpability in what went amiss in the past, or can accept full responsibility for it. A relationship of substitutes actually postpones the conflict, never resolves it. Perhaps it is not possible to answer all the questions. Perhaps life is open ended and a multiple choice question. Possibly this is the reason that at the end it seems as if nothing has changed. Jadine goes back to Paris. Son goes to the island in her search. Margaret and Valerian remain the same, except that with Valerian's illness Margaret becomes the one providing stability. Nothing changes for Sydney and Ondine.

Yet, perhaps in a subtle way there has been a change. It is more in the sense of the exposition of the relationship equation amongst the guilty and the innocent of the past in the present. Perhaps, the change has been to highlight the inadequacy of seeing the past or the present within fixed slots. Perhaps the change has been to bring out the ambivalence inlaid into Jadine's situation making it implausible to see her either as 'tar baby' (as some accuse the black woman of being so in the past) or as a



'black mamma' (Jadine sees it to be only a limited role for black women in the past). She is not a conventional bearer of the past because she refuses to define herself in relation to the black male's images of a black woman. Jadine's dilemma is a pointer to the complexity in an experience which shows the inadequacy of seeing experience as made up of neat little blocks of the past, present or future.

The perception of the past is different in each writer. Pilate is the symbolic ancestral figure who despite being outside the circle of normal experience is the one who integrates Milkman into selfhood. She is able to do so by making her life a referential statement embodying her views. The past is not fixed for Pilate because she has through her efforts created her own self out of it. The nature of experience is such that the past is the living evidence of Pilate's affirmative life principles. Ms. Lissie is the ancestral figure but more in terms of the past than an actual participation of shaping the present with it. The idea is more so to take the significance of what is meant by Ms. Lissie's view of the past and point out the actual connections between her history and the oppression of women in the present. The emphasis is similar in the present to show that males and whites are guilty. Jadine's experience makes her an alien but the nature of experience is such that it is difficult for her to bear a past which is fixed.

In Jadine's experiential crisis Morrison is offering a view of the past which is not static. Therefore, there can be no straight forward resolution of an individual's search for roots.

Alienation itself is not a unified condition because as the novel shows what may be alienation from roots for Son could be 'coming home' for Jadine, her life in New York. The response to the communal past is also ambivalent. To Son, Eloë is the evidence of 'fraternity' while for Jadine it is 'a dump' (TB, 227). The quest never reaches a final point of solution for either Son or Jadine because the experience does not exist in simplified blocs of 'past' 'present' or 'future'. The aborted nature of the quest is symptomatic of the ambivalence inlaid into the experience of an Afro-American. Son and Jadine's experience shows that such ambivalence is present in any experience because each individual perceives the point of significance differently from the other or sees one's own view as the only correct perspective.

It is in the ability to grasp the complexity underlying the stereotyped formulations of Afro-American experience that Morrison succeeds in giving a universalist dimension to the specific experience of alienation for a black in American society.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

In the earliest expression of their ordeal as slaves can be traced the beginning of Afro-American women's literary tradition. The moment of verbalisation of the nature of a slave woman's trauma was the moment of the birth of the literary tradition. It signified that the slave woman through articulation was trying to move beyond the experience of victimization. In fact by telling her story the slave woman registered an important moment in her quest for self determination. The telling of the traumatic tale by the female slave, even when done for financial reasons, was at a very fundamental plane, an effort to connect with her past and reshape it into her present.

The recording of the journey towards selfhood has, therefore, meant for a black woman a very real connection with and an interactive recognition of the past. For the women writers also telling the story of the black woman invariably meant telling about her past. The past has more often been seen in terms of recognition of the moments of individual significance. The writings of black women show individuals engaged in personal quests towards selfhood. The writers show the questors' struggle to come to terms with the nature of their experience and in the process formulate perception of their selves.

The plurality within the experience makes it difficult to create a singular response. The very nature of experience is such that it can be understood only through a perception which

acknowledges the contradictions and complexities inherent in it. These make difficult a monolithic viewing of the past and hence each writer responds individually to what is significant in a black woman's quest for selfrealisation.

Whether it is the early slave narrative or the novel of a contemporary black woman writer, the concern has been to create some coherence through interaction with one's past. It is in the process of connection that the quest begins to take shape. It is through an acceptance of the connection that it becomes possible to alter perceptions about experience. The process helps to redefine one's self through a redefinition of the experience of victimization. Therefore, it becomes possible through telling of an experience to move beyond the condition of victimization, assess one's situation and recreate perceptions about it. The recreation of perceptions about the black woman's experience by women writers has involved describing the different aspects of her experience. The telling or the literary representation of black woman's experience has meant understanding her humanity and highlighting it by showing the inadequacy of stereotyped views.

The universalist approach engaged in this study has highlighted the many shades of a black woman's experience. The focus has been to show the possibility of more than one response to an experiential situation. The presence of plurality is accepted by the critical perspective which is universalist in its orientation. Race and gender based approaches are inadequate because they rule out the presence of contradiction and multivalence in a black woman's experience. Ideology emphasising

only one strand of experience tends to ignore the presence of more than one kind of response to an experience.

The contrastive visions of *Alice Walker* and *Toni Morrison* have illustrated that it is possible to have more than one kind of response to the black woman's experience even when both writers share the perception that black women have been victims. The analysis of representation of women in their fiction shows that search for selfhood is a consistent feature in a black woman's experience. Both novelists question stereotyped images of black women existing in society. The individual nature of their responses affects the manner in which they render alternative perceptions about black women's experience. Even though both are contemporary black women writers (a similarity of condition seen by feminists like Barbara Smith as source for similarity in their vision as well), *Alice Walker* and *Toni Morrison* are shown to have responded differently to the black women's experience.

Walker and Morrison are similar in their view that black women have been victims of sexism and racism. Still, the individual nature of their vision influences the kind of meanings which emerge out of their rendering of similar strands of experience. Their novels illustrate the novelists' concern to articulate the nature of a black woman's victimization. Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* delineates a black woman's victimization emphasising that the black male was always and actually the oppressor. In contrast, Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* shows the possibility of victimization in the

experience of black males too. Cholly who rapes his daughter Pecola is not seen by Morrison as an inveterate culprit. The novelist recreates emotional nuances within the experience of a black male as well which finally highlights the complex nature of woman's experience of victimization.

The black women's victimization is finally traceable in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* to a series of racist acts committed on black males. In Walker's novel a change in approach of black males is essential for a long lasting resolution of black woman's plight as victims of sexism. Walker indicates that black men need to attack racism, and not black women. Morrison, in contrast, does not see one to one connections in an experience. Her novel draws out the individuality of Pecola's experience. Therefore, the emphasis is to delineate the complex nature of an experience which is defined generally within dehumanising categories. *The Bluest Eye* reveals that Pecola's violation is not an isolated happening. Cholly too had been violated, emotionally if not physically. To have indicated a perception which does not trace black woman's victimization to racism or sexist acts alone is the point which distinguish Morrison's vision from Walker's. Morrison's focus is on drawing out the individuality of each one's experience - male as well as female - which renders any generalisation about either finally meaningless. The depiction of victimization of Cholly and Pecola is able to highlight the actual inadequacy of labels of victimiser or victim. Cholly, the conventionally regarded victimiser is shown to be also a victim in another experiential

situation. Morrison's novel, unlike Walker's, is able to bring out the actual shaping influence of other elements in an experience which are not easily fixed within categories of race or gender.

Morrison's novel *Sula* highlights her concern not to 'bow out' with 'easy answers' to 'complex questions'. The question is not so complex if understood from a race or gender based perspective. From a universalist perspective it is possible to recognise the magnitude of complexity in an experience and to appreciate Morrison's treatment of the experience of being an outcast.

The experience of being an outcast is an explicitly marked reality for a black woman. Morrison's novel focuses on the experience of an outcast not only in terms of the black person who is placed outside the white community. It is more in terms of an inner sense of alienation and rejection which is manifested outwardly in the form of rebellion and non-conformity. Walker's novel *The Color Purple* shows that the presence of a female outcast figure can actually create, in another female, the urge to question her own conformity to the social circle. Morrison and Walker are concerned in these two novels to alter the existing perceptions about the experience of a black woman as an outcast.

Emerging out of the concrete situation of an Afro-American's marginality in white society, Morrison's novel shows the possibility that a black may also be regarded as an outsider even within the black community. In contrast, Walker shows the

necessity of a female outcast figure conventionally regarded as an undesirable presence. Unlike Morrison who is of the view that alienation is a state of mind, Walker's novel sees alienation more in terms of an explicit form of resistance and therefore reposed in a physical presence. The novel *The Color Purple* shows the focus of Walker to be on making the figure of the outcast (Shug) a crucial motivating physical presence for Celie who is actually victimised inside the society. The outcast is also shown in the novel to initiate changes in the self perception of the black male (Mr. \_\_\_\_). Celie's experience of victimization begun by her stepfather is further perpetrated by the oppressive acts of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. The reformation of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is therefore intended to show that the black male is an inveterate victimiser who stands in the way of a black woman's attainment of self realisation. The significance of the female outcast figure therefore, lies in the need of black women to reject the dictates of the patriarchal social structure. Walker is of the view that the black female must consciously break through the citadels of society and revel actually in her condition of being an outcast. Walker affirms that it is only in being an outcast a black woman can counter not only racism but also sexism.

On the other hand, Morrison's novel *Sula* shows that the tendency to label and fix an individual within slots is found in black females too. It is the women in the black community who label Sula as a 'whore' and Nel is labelled as the woman who in contrast is totally pure and innocent. Sula is labelled as a 'whore' because what is seen as wrong by society is more easily



discernible in her actions. Unlike Sula's, the actions of Nel are for all intents and purposes innocent and devoid of any evil intention. Yet, as is seen in the novel, Morrison shows the presence of the will to do wrong even in the innocuously pure female insider. According to Morrison, it is the will to do wrong, which is as incriminating as, or even more so than, actually committing a wrong. Seeing the experience of an outcast within terms that resist easy affirmation of defiance, Morrison's novel shows the complex nature of a black woman's experience. The experience of an outcast in the novel *Sula* is rendered in terms which show finally the inadequacy of any label, whether outcast or insider.

Morrison differs from Walker's perception of experience in that she does not see the outcast as indispensable in a society to point out its hypocrisy. Morrison's perception of the experience of an outcast suggests that it is difficult to demarcate at which point an individual is innocent or is culpable. The nature of experience is so complex that what may seem innocence from one point of view could become culpability from another. This is on account of Morrison's perception which does not see any intrinsic difference between a black woman and others. Each one - woman or man, black or white - has to be responsible for one's actions.

*mostly go on individual basis*  
Morrison focuses on the element of individual responsibility in an experience to convey the inadequacy of seeing individual responses as solely determined by race, gender or colour. Morrison shows that society assigns label of outcast to

individuals who do not conform to the accepted norm of responsibility. What is crucial to Morrison's view is that it is actually self deception which motivates people to label others as guilty and hence outcasts. Morrison shows in *Sula* that the seemingly wronged wife, Nel, is actually not so innocent. It is Nel's erroneous belief in innocence of her self which is her undoing.

The possibility of falsity in self perception therefore is emphasised by Morrison and as *Sula* shows this state of being is not limited only to black men or whites. *Sula* is an evidence of how Morrison employs narrative technique which brings out her view that black women who are conventionally seen as victims can also be victimisers. The novel shows that women too can be labellers, capable of marginalising other women. The absence of a mature, integrated self perception is seen by Morrison as responsible for the urge to label others. Morrison shows in *Sula* that even women, impelled by self duplicity, can indulge in dehumanising other women through demeaning labels.

In Walker's novels, on the other hand, the possible humanising of black women's image is realised through a rhetoric of victim/oppressor. Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* shows Fanny struggling for self realisation because she is confused by the social expectations of her as a wife. Her inner plight is conceived in terms of the oppression innate in social institutions like marriage. Walker affirms that black women, like Fanny, need to reject the perceptions of society and redefine their own views and values without injunctions from

males or whites. It is the presence of power groups like these which in Walker's opinion impose stereotyped perceptions about black women and in the process rule out her humanity.

In contrast, Morrison's novel *Jazz* focuses on the individual nature of responses that cannot be explained primarily in terms of elements of race, gender or colour. *Jazz* is also like Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* a delineation of an experiential crisis within matrimony. However, unlike Walker, Morrison sees the possibility of more than one perception on the crisis. In a crisis created by an extra-marital affair Morrison does not see resolution in terms of seeing the wife as innocent and the husband as the one who is errant and guilty. Morrison, therefore, is intent on redefining through a particular experiential crisis ideas about the entire spectrum of experience. In fact, through revising views on the eternal triangle of the errant husband, the other woman and the wronged wife, Morrison is actually redefining existing perceptions not only of marriage but the complexity inlaid in the entire human condition as well. By showing the presence of self-delusion in each individual - whether the husband or the wife - Morrison shows that falsity in self perception can bode ill for any relationship. Morrison confirms that falsity is a possibility for wives as well as for husbands. In fact, by the uniqueness of their responses Morrison shows that self duplicity is not an attitude found only in black males or whites. It is seen in black women as well.

On the other hand, Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar*

tries to show that self-duplicity is what the black males and whites are specifically prone to. Walker's basic concern for showing black women as victims influences her perception of the nature of self-duplicity within the state of matrimony as well. Therefore, Walker provides a female ancestral figure, Mrs. Lissie, whose presence is instrumental and consequently essential for shaping an alternative perception in black males towards matrimony. The black male, Suwelo here, is shown to gradually acquire insight into his own duplicity through the agency of Mrs. Lissie. Suwelo is shown to finally see his own active role in making marriage an oppressive living condition for his wife, Fanny. Walker in the novel shows women as victims within marriage while males are the oppressors because they have false perceptions about themselves.

This sense of self-delusion which aggravates a crisis is not stated by Morrison as an attribute only of black males. Instead, Morrison shows in *Jazz* that a deluded perception of self, as completely innocent, can be present in women too. Earlier perceptions saw in the experience of a black woman only exploitation but as Morrison has shown it is possible for the victim also to be an exploiter. Morrison reverses existing notions about marriage by reversing prevailing views about the nature of black woman's experience. In seeing their response as also capable of oppressing a black male Morrison is able to convey a realistic perception of the experience.

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The experience of motherhood, like the institution of marriage, has been perceived by feminists as an oppressive

situation for women. Writers have offered individual perceptions on what they perceive as crucial in the experience. Walker's concern in *Meridian* is to redefine the notion of who is a mother in a real sense. Similarly, Morrison too is exploring and questioning the myths of motherhood in *Beloved*. It is interesting to note that both the writers have been focusing on demolition of perceptions which do not accept complexity as an intrinsic element of Afro-American women's experience.

Walker and Morrison in their novels show that it is not always correct to see the one who is different in her choices as one who is wrong, as one who is an outcast. *Meridian* and *Sethe* are shown to live and struggle by the choices they make for themselves. Walker's aim is to show that the notion of motherhood existing in society is oppressive because it does not give women the chance to choose for themselves. Walker shows therefore that those who are forced into an experience and live by the labels assigned by the society could actually be the ones causing damage to those they are supposed to nurture, as in the case of *Meridian's* mother in *Meridian*. Morrison, like Walker, emphasises that mothers who are different are not necessarily wrong. They could, like *Sethe*, be the ones actually loving their children more than they can express. Nevertheless, Morrison, unlike Walker is more concerned to show that the redefinition of what is 'true motherhood' involves acceptance of the fact that it is individuals who make the choices and are therefore responsible for them. Walker, in contrast, builds up the experience actually in a way which indicates that women need to

question the necessity of motherhood primarily because of its inherent oppressive nature.

In Morrison's novel it is not motherhood which is questioned but more crucially the inquiry is into the nature of individual responses. These responses are multiple and can not be understood within generalized formulations. What is of interest here is that though both writers are concerned to question the notion of motherhood as an ideal, blissful state, it is Morrison who convincingly brings out the complexity inlaid in it. This is possible because Morrison, unlike Walker, does not question the nature of black woman's experience with the view to highlighting her status as a victim and the need or possibility for the change in the status only after rejecting it. Morrison too records the process of change in Sethe in response to her situation but the change is more in terms of realizing the complex consequences of her own choices which make her condition not easily definable within the rhetoric of oppression. Walker, on the other hand, shows Meridian's quest for selfhood highlighting the necessity for rejection of the inadequacy of the existing attitudes towards the experience of motherhood. The inadequacy exists, according to Walker, because the imposition of social norms on the experience deprive it of its individual significance. This imposition creates the basis for responses out of the normal on the experience. Walker sees imposed images of motherhood as expression of the actual domination on black women. Therefore, Meridian's unconventional responses to the experience of motherhood are drawn by Walker as symbolic vociferations of

resistance.

The study has shown that Walker and Morrison's contrastive visions shape their portrayal of black women in fictional works. Both writers are trying through their works to alter perceptions about an experience generally cast within stereotyped images. Yet, it is of interest to see that Walker portrays women as innately innocent, liable to be victimised and therefore urgently requiring alteration of social perceptions about them. In emphasising that black women are innately innocent Walker actually holds up her view that "black women are the most fascinating creations in the world". Seeing them as 'fascinating', Walker shows in her portrayal black women as ones who are basically victims but who can change their situation. Walker's stress on seeing the importance of change in black males' attitude is an indication of her recognition that black males too can change. Walker sees them possessing the potential to change, for becoming more mature, for broadening perspective on women. Seeing them as capable of change conveys Walker's aim to show them as complex beings, capable of growth and change, and not totally static. Nevertheless, the change is towards a view of black women that elevates their status as innocent ones.

Such clear cut demarcation of innocent and guilty is absent in Morrison. The comparative aspects highlight the nature of difference in perceptions. An experience which has been very conveniently drawn within a rhetoric of victim and oppressor is perceived differently by Morrison. Experiential situations which have been more often defined in monolithic terms are questioned



by both writers. The difference in their individual perceptions is nonetheless evident. Walker does question the existing stereotypes but her portrayal of women actually replaces one stereotype with another. Walker's view of black women as invariably the innocent victims creates another stereotype about them. In stark difference is Morrison's perception on the black women's experience. Morrison is of the view that the black women as a victim is also capable of being an oppressor in an another experiential situation. Her novels, are therefore, able to grasp more sharply and convincingly the ambivalence within the experience. Morrison's portrayal of the experience highlights the complexity innate to it, but which has more often been simplified in static terms like good or bad, innocent or sinner, minor or major, and even alien or insider. Morrison's novels are therefore an exposition of the many hues of the woman's experience which are hopelessly and inadequately explained through categories of a monolithic nature.

This is the reason that quests for self realisation are realistic and enriching in Morrison's novels *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* as compared to Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar*. The quests are journeys for integrating the past with the present. Morrison's novels do not show 'past' as pure, innocent period which would change for the better the present which is corrupted. This is actually the focus and the manner of depiction of quest in Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar*. The possibility of individual choices which make for a complex perception of experience in the past is missing in Walker's novel

but is developed to the full in *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*. The questor has to recognise that acceptance of multiple responses in one self leads to the final recognition of multivalence in responses to categories of past or present. A quest is therefore a conscious effort to reshape one's experience, give it some meaning by understanding the nature of one's experience.

The comparative analysis has shown the experiential points at which Walker and Morrison differ. Their individual visions show that they differ in their response to what is significant in the experience of a questor.

The study by showing the points of contrast and similarity between Alice Walker and Toni Morrison and between them and their predecessors suggests a more concrete basis for marking the points of continuity within the Afro-American women's literary tradition. The study has shown that close reading of significant experiential patterns and strategies to represent those strands of experience from a universalist perspective highlights the diverse responses to a black woman's experience. The universalist perception accentuates the humanity of black woman's experience. By focusing on the ambivalence within it the study has shown the inadequacy of critical views that define the experience in relation to a fixed perception of elements of race, gender, colour and class that go into making the experience.

The study has shown that *Alice Walker* and *Toni Morrison* though similar in their concern to delineate the black woman's

experience differ in their approach and final aim as writers. In comparison with Alice Walker, Morrison's refusal to categorize Afro-American experience gives her greater freedom to explore the complexities inherent in it.

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7

STUDENT'S  
RESPONSE  
To  
EXAMINER'S REPORT

ON

WOMEN AS SEEN BY WOMEN : A STUDY OF AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

By

Ms. NAVNEET SETHI  
ROLL NO. 9010062

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
KANPUR - 2208016, U.P.  
INDIA

7  
Sir/Ma'am,

I have with me a copy of your report on my thesis, "Women as Seen by Women : A Study of Afro-American Women Writers". You have in the report pointed out certain deficiencies and factual errors in the text of the thesis expressing dissatisfaction with my basic thesis on the following accounts :

- Inability of the thesis 'to grasp the complexity of Afro-American women's writings';
- Not seeing sufficient merit and relevance of race and gender as important 'analytical categories' in any identity making process in specific context of black women in American society;
- Imbalance in the comparative framework as a result of which Toni Morrison is seen in a more favourable light than Alice walker; and
- Finally, (and perhaps more critically the source for your dissatisfaction) that I am trying to construct a "monolithic theory that can convincingly contain the diverse culture of United States under the rubric of universalism". (P. 1 of the report)

I hope I have managed in the above points to distill the major areas of your disagreement and dissatisfaction with my thesis.

If I have managed to do so then can I also try to offer by way of some clarification possibility for a reevaluation of my research effort. I hope you too share a mutual concern and belief that creative and critical activities are interactive enterprises. As you rightly mention in the report 'literary criticism is not a static endeavour' (P. 5 of report). I too fervently support that no activity, least of all creativity and criticism, can do without collaborative efforts. It is such a spirit of collaboration and concern for a more meaningful dialogue on Afro-American women's writings' that comes across in your report on my thesis. And it is in the same spirit of collaboration for a better understanding of Afro-American culture and literature that I respond to your report.

THE THESIS IS IN RESPONSE TO THE 'COMPLEXITIES IN AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITINGS'

My thesis is an effort to highlight the complexities in Afro-American women's writings' springing naturally from the complexity innate to Afro-American women's experience. What actually strikes me most convincingly about Afro-American women's writings' is the working out of the concern to illuminate the complex nature of their experience. The many strands of experience are woven so intricately into the fabric of a black woman's experience that a holistic viewpoint would first accept the complexity in the experience.

As a universalist critic my primary concern has been not to overlook the depth and range of creative vision but through my thesis illuminate the maturity of the Afro-American literary tradition. It is the concern of my thesis not to dismiss but to accentuate "the multivalence in the experience which cannot be defined completely only in relation to fixed categories" (P. 1 of Thesis)

It is the 'multivalence' in the Afro-American women's experience which I have tried to grasp and explore in the thesis. The usage of the word 'multivalence' in the thesis is perhaps in conceptual proximity to your concern as well. You are also, if I read correctly, in looking for "multifaceted aspects in a writer's work" (P. 3 of report) trying to reach a broader perspective in responding to Afro-American women's writings. 'Multivalence in experience is a manifestation of the complexity innate in it, a quality that resists simplified categorisations of black women either as victims or as oppressors. Like you, I too am trying to explore the variegated strands of experience that go into the creation of a black woman's sense of selfhood, the identity making process. Perhaps the effort in the thesis to bring out the 'multivalence' in the experience is not so diametrically opposed to your espousal of a critical mode that is "inclusive of a variety of qualities that determine identity" (P.3 of report).

In fact the possibility of seeing Afro-American women's writings from a universalist perspective is not a dismissal but a recognition of the complexity inlaid into the tradition. The writers create out of the flesh and blood of their experience, their everyday realities, the 'this-ness' of their social



situation. They write out of the specificity of Afro-American culture and condition. Therefore, the range of insights available in their writings, I hope you too will affirm, are an indication of the multivalence and not the one dimensionality generally attributed to Afro-American women's experience. I was motivated by a genuinely felt need to explore the plurality of responses on aspects which generally are defined in dismissive terms or are reduced to stereotypes. The conceptual framework of the thesis to grasp the multivalence in Afro-American women's experience I felt could be tested in relation to certain thematic strands in the novels from a universalist perspective.

My thesis is not the last word on the various themes making up the range of fictional representation of Afro-American women's experience. I hope we share the view that the most salutary aspect of literature and literary study is that it allows for the germination and growth of multiple viewpoints. Perhaps this is in keeping with the raw material that is the concern of all literature and literary study — the human condition. And perhaps there can be no last word on the human condition. The experience of Afro-American women is complex enough, precisely because it is human, to allow for a multiplicity of responses to it.

**THE THESIS DOES NOT OVERLOOK THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE AND GENDER AS IMPORTANT 'ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES'.**

You have expressed dissatisfaction as my universalist critique excludes an interrogation' of most of the categories that are important to black women (P. 4 of report) and also that I reject 'race and gender as valid analytical categories' (P.3 of report).

I agree with you that race and gender have been and still are important analytical categories. Their study is helpful to understand the nature of power equation in American society. Afro-American women's writings have been studied and still are studied from race and gender oriented critical perspectives. They are significant reference points for understanding the elements of 'dominance and submission' (P.1 of report) in the interaction of Afro-American women with other groups in society.

In fact, a universalist critique on the different experiential strands making up a black woman's existence has been possible precisely because of the critical perceptions already

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existing on Afro-American women's writings. The need to grasp the 'flux of emotions' (P. 1 of thesis) in the experience and the focus on the nature of ambivalence rather than the element of resolution provides the basis for the universalist approach as taken up in this study. The idea has not been to dismiss the ground laid by gender and race oriented critical approaches. The survey of race and gender oriented critical approaches in the introductory chapter is intended to highlight the important phases in the growth of the critical thought, bringing it to the present phase of critical concerns. The thesis's conceptual concerns allowed for, within its scope, a brief survey of different critical approaches instead of an explicit avowal of race and gender oriented approaches.

Within the conceptual structure of the thesis the need was to indicate the 'new directions'. The survey recognises the ground that had been prepared by race and gender oriented approaches for reexamining the representation of Afro-American women's experience. The survey was intended to draw attention to the different phases of growth in critical perception. In coming to the point of perception where critics like Hortense Spillers, Deborah McDowell, Barbara Johnson are exploring the possibility that black female identity is 'not static, unified or insular' (Deborah McDowell's essay 'Boundaries : Or Distant Relations and Close Kin' in the anthology **Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990's**), it is perhaps in keeping with the diversity of the literary tradition to have responded to Afro-American women's experience from a universalist perspective.

Your comments pertaining to the validity of race and gender as important analytical categories indicate the feasibility of incorporating the nature of their importance in the introductory chapter. I have worked on the suggestions making modifications in the introductory chapter to the extent that the incorporation does not create imbalance in the conceptual framework.

#### **UNIVERSALISM HIGHLIGHTS THE COMPLEXITY IN THE REPRESENTATION OF EXPERIENCE**

Your apprehensions are understandable. When people talk of universalism the idea is perhaps to dilute the distinctness of Afro-American culture, to adopt a condescending tone on the 'everyday realities', of what it means to be a black man or a

7 black woman in a society which has from the very first encounter systematically established ways and norms to annihilate the very sense of selfhood amongst Afro-Americans. Political control naturally did lead to a literary hegemony and the creation of white sanctioned models for studying the nature of Afro-American experience and cultural forms. And all this was, and is done in the name of universalism.

Universalism, as a result, has become synonymous with the dominant group's power to define what is mainstream and what is minor; what is parochial and what is universalist. A universalist approach to ethnic literature has been perhaps more of a convenient way to denigrate the cultural difference and erase the specificity of ethnic experience, elevating instead the dominant group's perspective. Universalism is a perspective that possibly smacks of the hypocrisy of the dominant group and that is why a universalist is looked at with skepticism. Universalism may mean that one is trying to construct a 'monolithic theory' under its rubric.

I am not attempting to do so in my thesis. In fact, my objective to explore the 'multivalence' in the experience, the 'flux of emotions', is an indication that I am looking for the elements of complexity in the vision of the two writers. The study of individual novels in relation to significant thematic strands is building on the same objective. The idea is to see black women's experience in context of certain crucial experiential aspects from a perspective that has not perhaps been given adequate attention. My concern was to see how the two writers responded on aspects of experience that have received wide spread attention from the perspective of race, gender and class oriented approaches. The survey in the thesis of the various phases of race and gender critical approaches highlighted the direction into which the creative and critical tradition was moving. The conceptual emphasis of the thesis grows out of the directions taken by the critical tradition and shows that perhaps it is time now to see the experience from another perspective too, the universalist perspective.

In taking a universalist perspective I am perhaps broadening the framework from which to view the historical legacy of black women's experience in America. The broadening of perspective,

more specifically the effort to grasp the flux of responses, is intended to highlight the complex humanity of a group whose history makes an ambivalence in attitude amount to dismissal of the reality of the group's situation. Therefore, any effort to club together the experiences of black women with those of other groups is bound to be seen as an 'ahistorical' perspective.

In not detailing the race and gender aspect of the black women's experience I am not dismissing the torturous history or underestimating the stupendous struggle undergone by black women. In fact, what is remarkable is that a consciousness of their history gives greater incentive to Alice Walker and Toni Morrison to bring out the complexity in the experience. Seen from a universalist perspective their rendering of significant experiential aspects - the condition of being a victim, an outcast; a mother; a wife and a questor - becomes a springboard to see how, in spite of, and perhaps because of, its specific history, black women's experience is inlaid with layers of complexity. And this complexity in terms of the specificity of race, gender and class is recognised in the individual. What has been perhaps important to the testing of the thesis is, if the experience has, above and beyond these explicit markers of distinction elements which point to a 'basic human impulse' that throbs within each one. This basic human impulse is manifested in the imaginative rendering of experience, the real source of which is a condition of oppression and discrimination. And so what happens within a creative medium that it is possible for readers and writers to find emotional empathy with characters and situation remote from the immediacy of their own socio-cultural realities? It is perhaps at the plane of the imagination that readers and writers find kindred thoughts across the visible differences of race, gender, class, color and country. It is perhaps at the imaginative plane, that a writer translates the rawness of experience into symbols that may break out of the specificity of the experiential source and actually illuminate some aspect of the entire human condition. When symbols become points of reference then the separateness in terms of race, gender, color or country becomes incidental, instead of essential to an insight into the basic human impulse.

As the study shows Walker and Morrison try to expand the

symbolic connotations of a black woman's experience as a victim, an outcast, as a wife, as a mother, and as a questor. The broadening of the symbolic possibilities of the black woman's experience allows for exploring her fictional representation from a universalist perspective as well. The critical perspective as engaged in this study therefore tries to see the manner in which the individual vision of Walker and Morrison influences the process of redrawing symbolic images about black women. The nature of each writer's vision influences to a great extent the range of ambivalent responses drawn into the black women's experience and shapes possible alternative perceptions in relation to significant aspects of the experience.

#### **THE THESIS RECOGNISES THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ALICE WALKER**

"Preference for one writer need not mean condemnation of another" (P. 4 of report). It is quite possible that in the concern to highlight the nature of ambivalence in the experience my tone evinces a favourable predilection for Toni Morrison.

But, I do not in any way consider Alice Walker's creativity as negligible or irrelevant. In fact, you would have found that the analysis of individual novels by Alice Walker's takes note of the extent of experimentation in her strategies of narration. It is her consistent concern to conscientiously let the medium speak for itself which makes her a writer of greater depth and range than others. The concluding chapter's last lines perhaps give the impression that I am making a choice between the two writers, in favour of Toni Morrison. Perhaps, the tone suggests such a clear cut preference. I have made some modifications in the concluding chapter as well to the extent that the spirit of the thesis is not attenuated. In the chapter itself you will find (p. 181 to 183) I recognise the significance of Walker's perceptions about black men. Her recognition of the complex nature of experience of black men shows that she has "moved beyond" a perception that sees the experience within fixed "categories of a monolithic nature" (p. 184 of Thesis).

Her philosophy of 'womanism' is the moving force in her changed perception about black men and women and the community too. Walker perceives black men as complex beings, capable of change and growth and this is an evidence of her efforts to a more

complex perception of black women's experience as a whole drawing images that go beyond reductory stereotypes. She is an important writer and her commitment to the potential of the artistic medium makes her an interesting focus for comparison. She has contributed vastly not only by her depth of understanding but also by her conscientious efforts to make the medium a palpable means to articulate those insights.

Alice Walker and Toni Morrison both are conscious of the traumatic histories of their community. Their individual narrative techniques are indications of their individual visions on the black woman's experience. The symbolic transmutation of the socio-political, cultural and gender specific realities by *Alice Walker* and *Toni Morrison* make the presence of complexity in the experience not an oddity but a natural reality to which readers anywhere refer to for insights into the human condition as a whole.

#### **THE THESIS IS PART OF INDIVIDUAL QUEST TOO**

It is precisely because the best and enduring of literature works by Afro-American Women writers have tried to move out of the vicious cycle of reductory labelling of any kind that they have become for me and many readers in different parts of the world important points of reference in each one's spiritual quest. The writings of Afro-American women appeal to readers like me who are obviously not confronting similar kinds of oppression and exploitation as Afro-American women. In spite of being far removed from the cultural specificity of Afro-American situation the writings by Afro-American men and women do strike a responsive chord in me. Perhaps because somewhere in their writings I and many others like me find symbolic parallels that give meaning to our own individual quests. Perhaps you will agree that literature also, finally, like other forms of art, helps to give coherence to the many shades of conflicts in our soulscapes.

It is precisely because in Afro-American women's writings I see the many shades of this conflict and tension caught within the vortex of labels of a racist and sexist society that I see the greatest strength of Afro-American women's writings. What really moved me about Afro-American women's writings was this very effort to break out of the stereotypes about black women that exist in

society and in literature. The writes show immense courage not only in articulating their situation of victimisation but in the very process of articulation actually moving beyond dehumanising stereotyped perceptions to make connections with the human condition as a whole. It is very difficult and requires a lot of courage to shun the temptation of living within accepted labels.

I too, as a physically challenged person, have to face and confront this temptation. It would be convenient and less problematic if I accepted the label of a disabled person. It would make me eligible for many facilities, reservations and privileges. But, to give in once to the temptation would mean a gradual death of my spirit. In becoming self defensive I would see myself as a victim regarding the whole world as an inimical force, out there, ready to exterminate me.

Herein lies the crux of my choice of the area of research and the conceptual stance underlying the thesis. The struggle that is most difficult, I hope you will agree, is mostly within than without. And in the works of Afro-American women writers I see a similar palpably felt tension which indicated that these writers responded to life's many hues and shades.

In their struggle to move beyond a 'black and white' conception of their experience these writers evinced a deeply felt sense of complexity to their life situations. Their efforts have been to create characters that are convincing within the experiential specificity of the Afro-American condition but which are at the same time expressing the 'basic human impulse' that "throbs within each one and that requires a broader perception" (p. 2 of thesis). It is in this very crucial sense that this thesis is part of my own quest. I hope you will also agree that, like any creative work, a thesis is also the shaping of an individual's response and vision to an experience. In that sense it is also creative and an expression of an individual researcher's world view.

#### **ADMISSION OF FACTUAL ERRORS**

I admit my lapses in specific reference to *Our Nig*, the error related to the idea of a tragic mulatto and the discrepancies in response to Nella Larsen. No work is foolproof, mine too is not. I really appreciate your efforts in communicating to me the nature of factual errors.

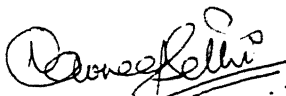
## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We share, in spite of difference in approaches, a deep concern for bringing out the complex nature of Afro-American women's experience. I hope this kindred feeling, for the multificity in an experience and in the writer's works, can illuminate the reality of critical activity as a collaborative enterprises, in which differences can exist as an evidence of the interactive possibilities of the human condition too. I am enclosing a copy each of the modified versions of chapter I and chapter VII.

Finally, I appreciate your active interest and the effort to give a detailed report.

Thank you,

With regards,



Ms. Navneet Sethi

Roll No. 9010062

Department of Humanities and Social Science  
Indian Institute of Technology  
Kanpur - 208016

Dated : 28th January 1997

Enclosures : (a) Copy of Chapter I (with modifications on pages 1-7,9,10,11,13,14 and 32 of the original text)  
(b) Copy of Chapter VII (with modifications on pages 183, 184 and 186 of the original text)



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

For an African in American Society, the process of self determination has involved a very significant struggle out of a maze of stereotyped perceptions. The historical circumstances of slavery, struggle for basic human rights and an ongoing struggle against less blatant forms of racism has perhaps given rise to a view that Afro-American experience is more adequately understood through sociological approaches. The orientation of sociological approaches is to explain complex human impulses within a framework of constructs like race, gender, colour or class. The emphasis for a universalist critic is more on exploring the flux of emotions that cannot be defined completely only in relation to fixed categories. A universalist approach refrains from defining the nature of an Afro-American woman's experience within categories of race, gender or colour.

As an individual trying to make coherent to oneself a complex array of experiential choices and responses, an Afro-American woman is similar to other women. A critic with universalist orientations shows that in the more enduring of literary works the writers draw out not the difference but the oneness of human emotions irrespective of group affiliation of individuals. The responses to the experience of being a victim of violence, of being a social outcast, of being a wife caught in the eternal love triangle or a mother questioning the consequences of her choices are specific as well as individual. Therefore, it is inadequate to categorise individual responses within a fixed framework based on racial, gender or class

affiliations. The difference in individual responses could be on account of many factors but a basic human impulse throbs within each one and that requires a broader perception.

In fact, Afro-American women's literary tradition grew out of this seriously felt need to express the basic human impulse within the Afro-American experience. Writers engaged the literary genre to bring about changes in existing attitudes and consequently bring forth the actual humanity of an Afro-American. Afro-American women writers felt an even more compelling need to articulate the repressed humanity of an Afro-American woman. If racist stereotypes blurred a clear view of the Afro-American male then for the Afro-American woman the struggle for self determination was against stereotypes that were not only racist, but sexist as well. The profusion of generalisations that surrounded the social perception of Afro-American experience seeped also into the critical perception of the creative representation of Afro-American women's experience. Approaches which were sociological in their stance strived to uphold the experience of an Afro-American woman within a rhetoric of opposition which saw experience in terms of an either/or model. The rhetoric of opposition would see Afro-American woman either as a victim or as a victimiser.

Race based approaches to literature, like the Black Aesthetic Movement of 1960s and 1970s, stressed the need for portrayal of black women which emphasised their preferable situation as supporters of black males. Taking its cue from existing role expectations for black women, the Black Aesthetic Movement advocated creation of fictional images which validated

the socially existing expectations. Therefore, the stress was on portraying black men as 'heroic challengers' of racism supported in their struggle by black women, who were cast in images of matronly figures - as 'mamas'. Black women were in their roles as 'mamas' seen as ones who were stoic, uncomplaining and always giving. Images of black women which deflected from such social norms were not regarded as authentic by race oriented critics. Such a view corroborated an existing social perception that possibly black women actually occupied a dominating position within the black community. Therefore, images of black women as 'emasculating matriarchs' were seen as fictional parallels of their domination of black males in actuality. Critics with orientations towards race based ideology upheld images which put black males in the position of victims and black women were seen as victimisers. Black men were seen as victims of black women as well as whites. As a result, black woman was perceived within the rhetoric of opposition, either as a whore or as an emasculating matriarch thereby revealing the negative aspects of the black males' perception of black women. Black women were preferred more in images of matrons and these were responded to positively by race oriented criticism.

Black feminists emphatically rejected such a perception of black women. The concern of black feminists has been to point out the inadequacy of race based critical approaches which see the black community only in relation to black males thereby reducing women to stereotyped images. Black feminists have striven to show that in excluding the strength and reality of black women's experience race based criticism was unable to grasp

the Afro-American experience as a whole.

The aim of black feminists therefore has been to give voice to black woman's experience in order to have a complete perception of Afro-American experience. Black feminist ideology focused not only on the sexual oppression of black women. One of the major concerns of black feminists, in fact, has been also to highlight the causal connection between racist and sexist oppression. Struggle against sexism is crucial to black feminists but also important is the fight against racism. They suggest, therefore, 'the centrality of Afro-American women's shaping of a vision' which would show the inadequacy of the 'old, white, male, elitist- centered view of the universe'.<sup>1</sup> Barbara Christian articulates here that the crux of black feminist ideology lies in perceiving the human condition within an equation of control and submission. What is clear here is that critics like Barbara Christian stress on reversal of a black woman's role - from that of submission to control. In fact, black feminist critics saw this reversal as crucial in any significant identify making process for black women.

Race based ideological approaches on the other hand see black men as victims. Black feminists therefore are in favour of those images of black women in fiction which highlight their experience as victims, and also show them as figures that are beginning to resist oppression. Critics like Barbara Christian,

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<sup>1</sup>Christian, Barbara, *Trajectories of Self Definition : Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction* **Black Feminist Criticism : Perspectives on Black Women Writers**. New York : The Pergamon Press, 1985. 173.

Gloria T. Hull, Barbara Smith are some of the representatives of the school of thought that emphasised the need for images of women that portray them as rebels. Opposed to the feminist school were race based approaches, as advocated by Addison Gayle Jr. in his work *The Black Aesthetic* (1971), which were more supportive of images of black women as matronly figures living under the black male's protection. Race based critical approaches therefore disapproved of images of women as rebels of the black community.

Both approaches tend to define the entire gamut of Afro-American women's experience narrowly, polarising it either in reference to race or to gender. As such the race and gender based critical approaches possibly tend to prescribe a set of norms against which the adequacy or inadequacy of a literary representation of black women is to be analysed. Race and gender based critical approaches operate on the rhetoric that there is something intrinsically separate in the experience of an Afro-American woman. It is this conspicuous separateness in terms of race, gender, colour or class which is taken as the sole determinant for the creation of images and also self perception.

This study tries to offer an alternate perspective on a group that has more often been regarded as a sociological problem. The universalist approach as engaged in this study does not negate the socio-cultural specific reality of Afro - American men and women. What the study tries to offer is a view that explores how far the writers have assimilated the realities of their condition within an imaginative medium. It is finally perhaps, as the study indicates, at the level of symbolic

transmutation of concrete experiences that a writer shows the range and breadth of her world view. Whatever be the conspicuous differences of race and gender, it is finally at the imaginative plane and in the working at of the rawness of experience within a creative medium that differences submerge into oneness. This is the reason that enduring works of literature speak to readers across differences of race, gender, creed and country.

A universalist perception does highlight the difference but with a view to individualising the complex responses and build up finally the humanity of the experience of an Afro-American woman. A crucial concern of a universalist critical perception is to draw out the complexity in an experience which would finally convey the inadequacy of labels of victim/oppressor, sinner/innocent or outsider/insider. The universalist critical perceptions that make up the conceptual structure of this study desist from a view which sees whites/the rich/males as the only ones who are oppressors. This study takes an approach which is universal in the sense that it accepts the presence of multivalence in Afro-American experience and refrains from typecasting it within the rhetoric of victimisation and oppression. Therefore, the critic contemplating the human situation without group bias perceives that it is possible for a victim in one experiential situation to be the oppressor in another situation. Not seeing a woman only as a victim or as an oppressor the universalist approach in this study stresses the complex nature of Afro-American women's experience and highlights the multivalence inlaid in it. This study tries to show that women as portrayed by women writers are not necessarily seen only

as victims or oppressors. In asserting the importance of individuality in creative response, as not finally framed by race or gender, this study takes a view which recognises the variegated nature of experience not developed in the manifestos of race and gender based approaches to Afro-American women's literary tradition. The specificity of response depends on the nature of an individual writer's vision of the experience. To understand the relevance of a universalist perception for exploring the complex experiential dimensions of Afro-American experience it would be insightful to know the nature of inadequacy in sociological approaches that have race or gender based orientations.

## II

Feminists see women as victims of the patriarchal social structure and as a consequence question the myth of 'feminine mystique'. The myth is questioned because "it permits, even encourages women to ignore the question of their identity"<sup>2</sup>. For a feminist, self determination is not possible for a woman till she establishes an independent identity. A feminist is of the view that a woman has to break free from domination of males. Therefore, feminists advocate portrayal of women which shows them trying "to change this unwholesome situation".<sup>3</sup> The focus is on showing the change in the woman's condition from a state of

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<sup>2</sup>Frieden, Betty. *"The Crisis in Woman's Identity". The Feminine Mystique*. England : Penguin Books, 1965. 63.

<sup>3</sup>Messer - Davidow, Ellen. *"The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticism"*. Gender and Theory. ed. Linda Kauffman. Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1989. 90.

victimisation to self determination. Feminists see the social norms associated with gender as responsible for the creation of stereotypes. And for feminists the shattering of gender based stereotypes is the primary step towards defining a woman's experience in totality.

In a different vein the black feminists stress on shattering not only sexist but racist myths that surround a social perception of black women. Both, white feminists and black feminists, are of the view that the experience of a woman is intrinsically different from that of a male due to the nature of sexist oppression endured by her. Both groups stress, therefore, on the need for consciousness raising strategies - in life and in art - that trace a woman's oppression to the factor of gender. Both operate on the view that women's experience needs to be represented in terms which emphasise the impact of gender related issues. Still, the need to include struggle against racism as part of the overall struggle against sexism sets apart black feminists from white feminists.

Black feminist ideology grew out of a need to assert the separate nature of a black woman's existential crisis owing to the twin factors of race and gender. The crux of their ideological position was explicated in the "Combahee River Collective" statement :

"As black women we see Black Feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Smith, Barbara et al, eds. 'A Black Feminist Statement : The



The concern of Black feminists is to approach the black women's experience from an 'antiracist' perspective 'unlike that of white women' and 'antisexist' perspective unlike that of black and white men and realise 'the need to have solidarity around the fact of race'.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the objective of white feminists, the aim of black feminists is not an outright rejection of males. In fact, an added aim of black feminists is to acquire the support of black males for finally demolishing the racist social structure. Black women are seen as victims of racism and sexism by black feminist and to that end they make efforts to create awareness in black men, who are also seen as part of the coterie of oppressors.

Black feminists advocate therefore portrayal of black women which embodies a "realisation that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors".<sup>6</sup> According to Barbara Smith, one of the first group of Black feminist literary critics, the portrayal of black women by black women writers would have conspicuous parallels "as a direct result of the specific political, social and economic experience they have been obliged to share".<sup>7</sup> Smith's stance is that "thematically, stylistically, aesthetically and conceptually

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*Combahee River Collective*". All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But some of us are Brave : Black Women's Studies. New York : The Feminist Press, 1982. 13.

<sup>5</sup>Smith, *A Black*, 13.

<sup>6</sup>Smith, Barbara. "Toward Black Feminist Criticism". All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies. ed. by Barbara Smith, et al. New York : The Feminist Press, 1982. 159.

<sup>7</sup>Smith, *Toward*, 154.

black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature".<sup>8</sup> Black feminist literary criticism as advocated by Smith assumed that black women's experience was intrinsically different from a white woman's experience. All black women, according to Smith, faced oppression which was not only sexist but racist in nature. The ideology of black feminism as stated by critics like Barbara Smith upheld portrayal of black women which showed *"more emphasis on reflecting the process of self definition, rather than refuting the general society's definition of them"*.<sup>9</sup> Smith therefore is of the view that all Black women undergo similar experiences which are more authentically portrayed by black women writers. Black feminist literary critics like Smith saw the portrayal of black women significant in its effort to cohere to the ideology of black feminism.

Barbara Christian too belongs to the earlier group of black feminists who upheld portrayal of Black women which would indicate a *"self centered point of view"*. Like Smith, Christian also favoured a positive representation of black women in as much as it showed the black woman's struggle against victimisation by black males and whites and her success in achieving selfhood through resistance of sexism and racism. According to critics like Barbara Smith and Christian literary representations of black women, if they highlighted the primacy of gender centered

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<sup>8</sup>Smith, Toward, 154.

<sup>9</sup>Christian, Barbara. **Black Feminist Criticism : Perspectives on Black Women Writers**. New York : The Pergamon Press, 1985. 175.

concerns of Afro-American women's experience were "more complex"<sup>10</sup>. At this point black feminist critics held up a representation if it portrayed black women in terms which were 'positive' as per the ideological norms. In that sense black feminist literary criticism as expounded by critics like Barbara Smith, Barbara Christian, Gloria T. Hull and Mary Helen Washington has been more inclined towards a literary representation which showed black women and not black males as 'heroic challengers', heroic challengers who rebelled not only against racism but sexism as well.

Monolithic ideological perceptions about selfhood marked the approach of black feminists in their emphasis on seeing black woman only as a victim. Seeing black woman primarily as a victim of extraneous circumstances indicated that black feminists saw the black woman's experience within a rhetoric of opposition. The alternative image of black women as rebellious challengers as favoured by black feminist critic was perhaps more a replacement of one stereotype with another.

The focus on black women's struggle, as a significant aspect of a struggle actually against racism, was a departure from the focus on seeing "black male as the face of the race"<sup>11</sup>. The brand of "black nationalism"<sup>12</sup> that grew out of the Black Power Movement

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<sup>10</sup> Christian, *Images*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> McDowell, Deborah E. *"Boundaries or Distant Relations and Close Kin"*. *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*. eds. Houston A. Baker Jr. and Patricia Redmond. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1989. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Gayle, Addison Jr. *The Black Aesthetic*. N.Y., Garden City : Doubleday and Co., 1971, 206.

focused on translating the principles of the movement into art forms. The Black Aesthetic Movement conveyed the necessity to portray black women in a manner that upheld the 'blackhood' of her experience. The portrayal of black men had to be 'heroic, beautiful and courageous' while black woman had to be portrayed in terms which brought out the essence of herself as a black rather than as a female. Therefore, her experience was portrayed within terms that saw the black male in a situation of control. The critics of Harlem Renaissance in 1930s also evinced a similar trend in their insistence on positive representation of the black community. In announcing the emergence of the "New Negro", Alain Locke in 1925 predicted the end of old 'unjust stereotypes',<sup>13</sup>. For Locke "the days of aunties, uncles and mammies, uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on". In making 'positive' representation of blacks as the sole criterion for judging the authenticity of literary representation, critics of Harlem Renaissance and Black Aesthetic Movement showed a perception of experience which was perhaps as monolithic as that of those Black feminist critics who favoured more a 'positive' literary representation of black women by Afro-American women writers.

Emerging out of this stress on positive representation of black women was the gradual shift in focus by black feminist critics on portraying the different shades of black woman's crisis of identity, as she struggled for selfhood resisting the stereotyped images created by racism and sexism. A woman writer

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<sup>13</sup> Locke, Alain : "The New Negro". *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. ed. Alain Locke. New York, 1925. 3.

was considered more significant if her work showed a conscious assimilation of black feminist consciousness. Therefore, fiction written by Francis E. W. Harper, Nella Larsen, Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fausset and Dorothy West was analysed from a black feminist perspective to see if the works cohered to the feminist norm of a positive image of black women. The works of these early writers were analysed to see if they incorporated a black feminist consciousness. If found lacking in the ideal portrayal of black women the works were frequently seen as minor within the literary tradition because the writer had seemed to address "not herself, black women or black people, but white countrymen"<sup>14</sup>.

Black feminist critical approach till this point functioned mainly on the view that black woman's experience needed a positive representation because a black woman had always been a victim. In her changed situation a black woman had to be portrayed positively. The process of her change is, according to the critics, best available in works of fiction which creatively represent the evolution of strong black female self. But, here too black feminist critics assume a monolithic black female self out there which is being searched for in a work of fiction. Instead of looking for in a work patterns of thematic strands which could indicate a writer's vision of experience, an essentialist black feminist approach enunciated by the earlier group of critics like Barbara Smith, brought in ideological expectations from outside for analysing the work of fiction.

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<sup>14</sup>Christian, *Trajectories*, 173.

These earlier feminist critics contributed in articulating mainly the need for a changed perception about black women, and are important in being able to initiate a debate on existing images, giving her a visible identity.

The perception of a black woman's experience from a black feminist perspective opened up ways to make her humanity finally visible. Like other ideological concerns feminism too has undergone a change in the scope of concerns it is able to address. Concerns, directly or indirectly, related to black feminism are beginning to be addressed now. A pointer on the gradual shift in black feminist literary criticism's concerns is seen in Deborah McDowell's essay, *"New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism"* (1980). McDowell warned feminist critics of "the danger of political ideology yoked with aesthetic judgement".<sup>15</sup> Her alternative was "rigorous textual analysis" of black women's writings in order to reveal the "stylistic and linguistic commonalties across the texts of black women" that had been stressed earlier by Barbara Smith. The stress on decoding textual strategies as a means to discern the presence of feminist consciousness in works differentiates McDowell's approach from Barbara Smith's agenda of black feminist movement in the essay *'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism'* (1977). Hazel Carby, another black feminist critic, states that Barbara Smith's "reliance on common experiences confines black feminist criticism to black

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<sup>15</sup> McDowell, Deborah E. *"New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism"*. *Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*. ed. E. Showalter. New York: Pantheon, 1985. 65.

women critics of black women artists depicting black women',<sup>16</sup>. Critics like Deborah McDowell and Hazel Carby represent the gradual shift in the focus of black feminist literary criticism. The possibility of more than one stream of black feminist thought shows presence of more than one kind of critical response to black woman's experience. Emergence of critical opinions different in their focus suggest that possibly black woman's identity was not as singular and monolithic as was assumed by the critical manifesto proposed by Barbara Smith. The idea "of reducing the experience of all black women to a common denominator" and limiting feminist critics to "an exposition of equivalent black female imagination" was regarded as "essentialist and ahistorical".<sup>17</sup> The growing concern amongst black feminist critics to dispel the myth of a singular black female identity, unified and whole, was reflected in their dissatisfaction with the idea of a "common black female language". This dissatisfaction implied that for the critics black female identity in works of fiction was not a static persona but an individual writer's expression of what he or she perceives to be significant in a black woman's experience. Since each writer responds from an inner creative vision it is difficult to assume the pattern of response only on the basis of a writer being black and female and writing about a black female. Generalisations limit recognition of complexity in any experience

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<sup>16</sup> Carby, Hazel. "Rethinking Black Feminist Theory" *Reconstructing Womanhood : The Emergence of the Afro-American Women Novelist*. New York : Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Carby, 10.

and deprive one of insights into the actual nature and depth of creative expression.

The emphasis on textual strategies indicated that perception of a black woman's representation came to be seen as manifestation of the writer's creation of "mythic structures".<sup>18</sup> Seeing "language" "not as a stockpile of referents or forms but an activity"<sup>19</sup>. Black feminist critics are trying to generate meanings about the experience from within the text and not impose them from outside.

The change in the nature of critical response by black feminists augurs a possible shift in the perception of the nature of the black woman's experience. The trend is no doubt towards decoding the representational strategies but the underlying emphasis is still on seeing how a work's techniques of representation show the affiliation to black feminist ideology.

The publication in 1989 of an anthology, **Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s**, shows the directions which black literary criticism seems to be taking at present. The anthology suggests programmes of investigation designed to "alter the nature of concerns and methods that have marked the study of Afro-American literature".<sup>20</sup> The anthology contains articles which stress the 'need to articulate the spaces of

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<sup>18</sup> McDowell, *New Directions*, 196.

<sup>19</sup> Gates, Henry Louis. Jr. **Figures in Black : "Words", Signs and the Racial Self**. New York : Oxford University Press, 1987. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Baker, Houston A. Jr. and Patricia Redmond. eds. **Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s**. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1989. 227.



contradiction,'<sup>21</sup> in Afro-American experience through exploration of 'literary archaeology,'<sup>22</sup>.

Critics featuring in this anthology - Michael Awkward, Henry Louis Gates. Jr., Richard Yarborough, Barbara Johnson, William J. Andrews - to name a few, explore the different aspects of Afro-American literary tradition from critical perspectives which are congenial in varying degrees to the critical approach taken in this study. The thematic commonalties between writers separated across years are understood better by exploring their individual strategies of representation which finally create an angle of vision.

Understanding the strategies of representation in works of predecessors like Hurston also help in knowing the artistic maturity of their vision and not seeing them as minor writers. Zora Neale Hurston, the Harlem Renaissance writer, is in fact regarded by feminist critics as the 'literary forerunner' of the black woman's literary tradition because her works are seen as "forerunner for the novels of 70s and 80s"<sup>23</sup>. Barbara Christian sees Hurston's significance in "radically envisioning the self as central", moving the portrayal from "a tragic mulatto" to a "more complex view of black women as it appears now in American

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<sup>21</sup>Spillers, *Afro-American*, 72.

<sup>22</sup>Baker, *Afro-American*, 104.

<sup>23</sup>Christian, *Trajectories*, 173.

literature"<sup>24</sup>. Hurston's fiction heralded the "second beginning and first real flowering" of Afro-American women's writing that made "artistic self consciousness an integral part of black woman's novel"<sup>25</sup>.

Black feminist critics see in Zora Neale Hurston's fiction the first movement towards individualization of black woman's quest for selfhood in terms of seeing the self as female first and foremost. But, such a view of Hurston undermines actually the basic element of universality integrated into her creative vision. An analysis of Hurston's path breaking novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) confirms the veracity of her assertion that her aim was "to present the man as he is because no man's life can rarely be summed up in a word, even if that word is black or white"<sup>26</sup>. In shunning the stance of "the sobbing school of Negrohood", Hurston's representational strategies are indicators of her refusal to negate the complexities in Afro-American women's experience. Hurston's novels reveal a maturity of perception which refrains from glorifying black experience as per the prescribed ideal of Harlem Renaissance.

There were writers who refused to see black experience only in glorified terms as was the norm of the Harlem Renaissance.

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<sup>24</sup>Christian, *Images*, 14.

<sup>25</sup>Spillers, Hortense and Marjorie Pryse. eds. "Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and the "Ancient Power" of Black Women". *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985. p. 14.

<sup>26</sup>Hurston, Zora Neale. "How It Feels to be Colored Me". *I Love Myself: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. ed. by Alice Walker. New York: Feminist Press, 1979. 153.

Hurston is a representative example of such a mature creative vision functioning at the height of the Harlem movement. From a universalist perspective Hurston merits consideration not only because of her efforts to formulate complex female selfhood, but more crucially due to her humanized portrayal not only of black males but whites as well. Hurston's representation of Afro-American experience reveals an artistic vision which comprehends its ambivalence in spite of opinions to the contrary.

The artists perception of presence of ambivalence in the experience is brought out with the help of a critical perspective that is universalist. It is possible to explore the individual nature of a writer's vision by close reading of fictional works. The method of close reading of texts from a universalist critical perspective can help to illustrate how each writer formulates patterns of significance. It is possible to compare the nature of writers' vision by analyzing individual responses to crucial strands of experience.

Afro-American women writers' portrayal of black women can be compared from a universalist perspective to see how writers at various points in the literary tradition respond to the experience. Close reading of the thematic strands of black women's fiction can reveal significant parallels and contrasts in individual writers' perception of Afro-American experience. The commonalties discerned by black feminist critics to uphold an ideal black female self are studied from a universalist point of view to show the presence of ambivalence in the experience.

For purposes of comparison, the portrayal of women by Afro-American women writers is undertaken here to see how

individual writers have varying perceptions about an experience. The scope of the study is limited to comparison of works of fiction by *Alice Walker* and *Toni Morrison*. Both are important, contemporary Afro-American women writers. Their portrayal of black women provides insights into the nature of their individual visions. Responding to their fiction from a universalist perspective makes it possible to check if both writers respond similarly to a particular aspect of an experience. The method of close reading of texts explores the nature of similarity and difference in their response to certain significant strands of experience related to black women.

### III

The quest for self realization by black women is the concern of novels by *Toni Morrison* and *Alice Walker*. Still, the contrastive nature of their creative visions is reflected in the different insights elicited from a comparative analysis. Both novelists are conscious artists who create symbolic equivalents which highlight their vision of black woman's experience. The nature of their vision influences their rendering of the experience in fictional terms.

Walker affirms that "her aim is to express the triumphs and travails of black women", to prove that "black women are the most fascinating creations in the world"<sup>27</sup>. *Alice Walker's* philosophy of 'womanism' is the essence of the nature of her creative perceptions. Her aim is to create fiction which upholds the

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<sup>27</sup>Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens : Womanist*

strategy for 'survival of black men and women together'. Her emphasis is to draw female oriented resolution of identity crisis. Toni Morrison, in contrast, is of the view, that "some women are weak and frail and hopeless and some are not"<sup>28</sup>, so she would "like to write about both kinds". She sees "gender conflict" as "a cultural illness" and refrains from seeking "easy answers to complex questions".<sup>29</sup>

As contemporaries the parallels and contrasts in their approaches to experience reveal possibilities of more than one response to black woman's situation. References are also made in this study to representative works by predecessors. These references reveal the multiple nature of responses to Afro-American woman's experience in the works of early nineteenth century women writers. An awareness of the predecessors' responses to experiential strands that recur in the literary tradition can reveal parallels in perception among writers at different points of the tradition. The works of fiction by the early writers show their efforts to alter existing stereotyped perceptions of black womens' experience. The individual ability of the writer to show the contradictory impulses within the experience emphasizes the validity of a critical perception which refuses to perceive black woman's experience in relation to slots created by society. Perceptions in this study try to highlight the inadequacy of analysing experience in terms of a social label

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<sup>28</sup>Morrison, Toni. "Interview", *Contemporary Literature*. 24.4 (Winter, 1983). 413-429.

<sup>29</sup>Morrison, Toni. "Interview", *Contemporary Literature*. 413-429.

which reduces an individual's humanity to a convenient generalisation.

Themes recurring in the writings of Afro-American women's writing are rendered therefore according to the nature of the individual vision of the writer. The choice of novels for comparative study has been made keeping in view the relative importance of a particular theme in a group of novels. It is possible to have more than one thematic strand in a novel even as it is natural for individual experience to be multivalent in its priorities.

Victimization of black women has been a recurring thematic strand in the writings of Afro-American women writers. Yet, as the second chapter shows it is possible for two contemporary women writers to respond differently to a particular experience. It is possible through a universalist approach to see the significance of Morrison's complex portrayal of black women as victims in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) in contrast to the womanist representation in Walker's novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970). The representation of black women's victimization was the concern of early black women writers too. The portrayal of contradictions in the experience of a black woman as a victim in Nella Larsen's novels '*Quicksand*' (1928) and *Passing* (1929) is evidence of a writer's effort to understand the complexity in an experience that has frequently been rendered in stereotyped images.

Entitled *Black Women as Victims : Exploring the Nature of Violence* the second chapter analyses the contrastive visions of Walker and Morrison. In *The Bluest Eye* though ostensibly the

black male is the culprit - raping his own daughter - Morrison employs representational techniques which turn the moment of crime into a tragic illumination of the nature of the black male's victimization as well. In contrast, Walker's need to articulate the violence inflicted on black women results in silencing the black male metaphorically at the actual moment of the crime - murdering his wife. Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* develops the theme of victimization on the rhetoric of victim/oppressor while Morrison shows the ambivalence in the experience by evidences which finally question the validity of terms like victim and oppressor.

The Third chapter entitled *The Outcast in the Community : A Different Kind of Presence* compares Walker's and Morrison's perception on the experience of a black woman as an outcast in the community. The chapter explores the nature of the writers' responses to labels of outcast/insider, pure/pariah, and innocent/sinner and tries to highlight the actual significance of these 'different' presences which a social perception may reduce to brutally exclusive categories. The concern is to see how these writers render the complexity inlaid into an experience that is generally stereotyped in simplistic terms.

Comparative references are made in this context to works of early women writers. Francis E. W. Harper's novel *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1929) and Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) provide instances of efforts by the predecessors of Walker and Morrison to render the experience of a 'pariah' figure in the community. The positive connotations in the outcast's experience

reveal the early writers' effort to render the experience differently from stereotyped perceptions existing at the time.

The potential of the female outcast figure to be the healing presence for the community is central to Walker's and Morrison's exploration of the black woman's experience. It is possible, as is shown by their novels, that one who is placed outside the community is possibly in a better position to understand its contradictions. The outcast or the pariah thus becomes a positive point of reference in their novels.

*Sula* (1974) is Morrison's effort to show that the "pariahs are often the conscience of the community"<sup>30</sup>. *Sula* shows the difficulty of finally saying who is actually the positive presence for the other. Both, the self-proclaimed innocent Nel, and the pariah, Sula, have to realize the simultaneity of contradictory impulses in their selves and try going beyond a perception of one's ownself as being completely innocent.

Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982) also shows that the outcast's presence is necessary because it makes possible the questioning of victimization of black women in the community. Equally important is the concern which portrays the pariah figure Shug as crucial for bringing about change in the black male's attitude towards black woman. Shug in *The Color Purple* is branded as an outcast because of her liaisons with white men. She is also labelled as a whore for consorting with husbands of black women like Celie who are part of the society. Still, it is

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<sup>30</sup> Morrison, Toni. "An interview". *Contemporary Literature*. 24, No. 4 (Winter, 1983). 413-429.



actually Celie's relationship with Shug that initiates her on the path of self realization. The novel validates the presence of an outcast figure. In contrast Morrison's concern in *Sula* is to define the experience of the pariah more in ambivalent terms when it becomes unrealistic to categorize an individual in either positive or negative terms.

Closely related to the quest for identity in women is the need to question the nature of their situation in society. This means a questioning of their roles as wives and mothers as well. The negotiation of identity crisis is done by exploring the nature of these experiential situations. The black woman's experience and the need for self realization is incomplete without an understanding of her experience of matrimony and motherhood.

The fourth chapter is entitled *Images of Wives : The (Un) Settled Marriage* and it explores Morrison's and Walker's portrayal of black women as wives. The institution of marriage is explored in Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and Morrison's novel *Jazz* (1992). The aim is to see the nature of their individual visions and gain an insight into the complexity within the experience.

Earlier, Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) written at a time when black culture was glorified had resisted easy generalisation of the experience. Instead, Hurston's novel is an enduring expression of a mature perception which does not see matrimony for black women within a rhetoric of opposition but draws out the complex impulses making up responses to the experience. Hurston's vision of the

experience moves the novel beyond the reductive dichotomy of husband as an oppressor and wife as a victim. Drawing the black female's quest for identity within the matrimonial experience Hurston renders its complex dimensions that move the experience beyond race or gender specific concerns.

The memory mode of narration employed by Walker in *The Temple of My Familiar* traces the nature of black woman's oppression by males or whites in every institutionalized social interaction. Tracing back to prehistoric times the exploitation and subjugation of black women as and when relations become institutionalized, Walker provides a historical perspective from which to perceive the oppression of black women within matrimony in the present context.

In *Jazz* Morrison's aim is also to question the nature of the experience of matrimony. What distinguishes her vision from Walker's is evident in the rendering of the significant experiential strands in the novel. Using the structural analogy of musical narrative form of Jazz, Morrison's vision of ambivalence of the matrimonial experience is brought out effectively. Unsettlement, as is revealed in the novel, is not caused by the imbalance of power distribution between husbands and wives. Morrison instead conveys in *Jazz* the presence of unsettlement as a natural consequence of any relationship based on false expectations. *Jazz* in contrast to *The Temple of My Familiar* makes it possible to see the presence of contradictory and complex impulses as integral to black woman's experience, so much so, it is possible to see through Morrison's vision complexity in an experience which has been generally perceived

through a film of reductive stereotypes.

Motherhood, in its very symbolic essence, has been seen as a condition of exalted humanity for women. The concern of the feminist movement to shatter the 'feminine mystique' has led to a questioning of the glorified image of motherhood. Within the black community motherhood has been exalted as an experience and possibly as the only source of sustenance against the ravages of racism and sexism. Exploring the nature of black woman's quest for identity black women writers offer alternative perceptions on motherhood.

The Fifth chapter entitled *Woman as Nurturer : Changing Perceptions of Motherhood* compares Walker's and Morrison's responses to the experience of motherhood in their novels *Meridian* (1975) and *Beloved* (1989) respectively.

Earlier writers like Ann Petry's *The Street* published in 1946 and Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* published in 1954 are also significant in their treatment of motherhood as an experience. These works merit consideration as they depict black woman's experience of motherhood from a perspective which does not negate the complexity intrinsic to it. In so doing Petry and Marshall become early examples of artistic maturity. Their effort to render the experience of motherhood not as an unvarying condition but as a situation inlaid with complexity indicates parallels with the vision of Walker and Morrison.

Walker's novel *Meridian* questions existing notions about motherhood. *Meridian* gives up her son to go on a personal quest for selfhood and in doing so violates the norms of society. But Walker's novel shows that the experience of motherhood is more t

do with the instinct to nurture and this does not grow naturally only out of the physical condition of being a mother. In fact, as the novel shows, Meridian's personal quest becomes the basis for shaping in her a more genuine response towards the experience of motherhood and seeing it in terms of an emotional capacity to nurture a life. The capacity to nurture, the novel shows, can exist apart from the physical experience of motherhood.

Morrison in *Beloved* is also in broader terms concerned with the conflict within Sethe, the slave mother who kills her infant daughter to save her from degradation of slavery. The dimensions of conflict within Sethe in the aftermath of the murder shows that the site of conflict is internalized. In revealing the nature of the introspection undergone by Sethe, Morrison's complex perception of the experience of motherhood is highlighted. The return of the slain daughter's ghost back into Sethe's fold throws up into Sethe's face questions she had kept at bay. Posing the questions through Sethe's conflict torn consciousness, Morrison is exploring the impact of one individual's decision on another. It is difficult to say perhaps even of a mother whether what she decides for the child is always right. The nature of Sethe's internalized trauma alters perceptions on motherhood through the focus on her emotional crisis. In Walker's novel, her perception of Meridian's crisis for identity is resolved by showing her to be a nurturer in a more authentic sense. In her search for a meaningful expression of herself Meridian's disregard for society's tarnished image of her as a mother acquires significance. Creation of a new perception of motherhood through Meridian is attempted to offer

alternative images of black women's experience. Morrison's focus in *Beloved* is not to see the experience of motherhood in terms of choices for or against it. The focus is to show the ambiguous reality of the choices made and the difficulty of making an option.

Implicit in the effort of Afro-American writers to recreate perceptions has been the need to render the quest in ways which give the journey specifically black as well as universal meanings. The Sixth chapter entitled *The Individual as Questor : Search for Connections* focuses on different dimensions of a quest.

Afro-American experience has been seen as possessing elements which create relevance of the quest theme. Dissatisfaction with the existing condition and the effort to change it constitute the quest of an individual. Going with this definition of quest, it is possible to see an element of quest, a feeling of search even in an earlier work like Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928). This experiential concern is developed with far greater maturity and artistic skill by Hurston in delineating the quest of Janie towards selfhood in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Gwendolyn Brook's novella *Maud Martha* (1954) and Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for the Widow* (1989) also delineate the journey towards self realization in black girls and black women.

A point of difference between these early efforts and Walker and Morrison's novels is that, unlike the earlier writers, both Walker and Morrison render the questor's search for self realization through a facilitating agent, an ancestral figure who initiates the sense of quest in the alienated individual. In the

present context, when the notion of going back to roots is looked at with skepticism, Walker and Morrison focus more on individualising the nature of crisis and its resolution. The idea is to show the necessity of a quest in terms of a sense of individual responsibility. Walker and Morrison emphasize that an alienated individual evinces dichotomy in response towards every experiential aspect. The novels chosen for the analysis of the theme of quest are Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981) and Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989).

In two novels, *Song of Solomon* and *The Temple of My Familiar*, the ancestral figure is a woman, while in *Tar Baby* the black male is shown to possess qualities which accentuate the sense of alienation within the black female. The nature of experience in *Tar Baby* is shown to be far too complex to be resolved simplistically.

Suwelo's quest in *The Temple of My Familiar* is facilitated directly by Ms. Lissie, the ancestral figure. Still, the underlying concern is to show the impact of change in Suwelo, in his approach towards women. In tracing the historicity of oppression against black women Ms. Lissie's memories are designed to orient Suwelo towards realization of his cruelty towards the women in his life. Thus, the female ancestral figure Ms. Lissie shows the root cause of his existing emotional stasis to be rooted in his alienation from the ancient principles which empowered women. Walker creates a quest in the present social situation and gives the racial specificity a measure of contemporary relevance.

Similar is the aim of Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*. In

Pilate, Morrison provides a facilitating agent for Milkman, the alienated individual. The nature of crisis of identity is seen more in terms of the absence of a sense of responsibility towards others. Thus, the basis of Pilate's initiation of Milkman is not to embark on a search for cultural precedents in the black cultural past. The basis of search is personalized. Morrison makes this succinctly evident by showing Pilate, an outcast in all senses of the term, as actually providing Milkman with insight into the nature of his crisis. Walker in her novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*, develops the notion of a cultural past as a monolithic psychological and social condition. Her aim is to show women as oppressed and men as oppressors and to suggest ways for change in the black woman's condition. In Walker's view change is possible by assimilating the norms of the black community's cultural heritage. Morrison's novel, in contrast, develops the notion of past as dynamic and ever changing by showing different responses to a similar event in the past. It becomes difficult in *Song of Solomon* to see men as only oppressors.

*Tar Baby* has a female protagonist Jadine who is alienated and her relationship with Son, a black male, embodying symbolically the values of the past, forms the crux of the experiential conflict in the novel. Morrison extends her perception of experience as a flux which is not wholly comprehended in terms of blocs of past, present or future. The open-endedness of the novel shows that Morrison hesitates to see 'past' as a glorified entity in the black community. In fact, the novel reveals rupturing of experience into complex fragments which cannot be explained simplistically in terms of an African past. The complex nature of Afro-American experience cannot be satisfactorily defined within the slots of past, present or

future. Therefore, a critical approach which is universalist in emphasis is better able to grasp the open-endedness of the experience.

The Seventh Chapter is the *Conclusion*. In summing up the individual observations of each chapter the conclusion points out the significant thematic patterns in the works of fiction by Toni Morrison in comparison with those of Alice Walker's. The observations also point out the significant contribution made by early Afro-American women writers. Writers like Zora Neale Hurston are the most representative examples of mature creative perceptions at an early point in the Afro-American literary tradition. Their works show a growing concern to see Afro-American women's experience in all its variegated colours and finally show the inadequacy of categorising individual needs and desires within a rhetoric of opposition.

Alice Walker and Toni Morrison's works reveal a continuing concern to render the woman's experience with greater depth and complexity. Alice Walker attempts to create in her novels images of women within explicit 'womanist' terms that are saved from becoming stereotypes due to an equal concern in Walker for the craft of fiction as well. Morrison's portrayal, as the study shows, conveys a more mature and convincing rendering of the moments of ambivalence within the Afro-American woman's experience. The nature of Morrison's vision is such that stereotyped images of an Afro-American woman's experience become inadequate for grasping its pluralistic nature. Morrison's fiction, offers an enduring recreation of black women's experiential realities.

The universalist approach makes it possible to understand the nature of complexity within an experience by demonstrating the possibility of diverse responses to experiential situations which may share similar group specific concerns. This study validates its conceptual concerns that the black women's experience is as complex and multivalent as any other experience, and therefore a study of its complexities gains from a critical perspective which is universalist.



## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

In the earliest expression of their ordeal as slaves can be traced the beginning of Afro-American women's literary tradition. The moment of verbalisation of the nature of a slave woman's trauma was the moment of the birth of the literary tradition. It signified that the slave woman through articulation was trying to move beyond the experience of victimization. In fact by telling her story the slave woman registered an important moment in her quest for self determination. The telling of the traumatic tale by the female slave, even when done for financial reasons, was at a very fundamental plane, an effort to connect with her past and reshape it into her present.

The recording of the journey towards selfhood has, therefore, meant for a black woman a very real connection with and an interactive recognition of the past. For the women writers also telling the story of the black woman invariably meant telling about her past. The past has more often been seen in terms of recognition of the moments of individual significance. The writings of black women show individuals engaged in personal quests towards selfhood. The writers show the questors' struggle to come to terms with the nature of their experience and in the process formulate perception of their selves.

The plurality within the experience makes it difficult to create a singular response. The very nature of experience is such that it can be understood only through a perception which

acknowledges the contradictions and complexities inherent in it. These make difficult a monolithic viewing of the past and hence each writer responds individually to what is significant in a black woman's quest for selfrealisation.

Whether it is the early slave narrative or the novel of a contemporary black woman writer, the concern has been to create some coherence through interaction with one's past. It is in the process of connection that the quest begins to take shape. It is through an acceptance of the connection that it becomes possible to alter perceptions about experience. The process helps to redefine one's self through a redefinition of the experience of victimization. Therefore, it becomes possible through telling of an experience to move beyond the condition of victimization, assess one's situation and recreate perceptions about it. The recreation of perceptions about the black woman's experience by women writers has involved describing the different aspects of her experience. The telling or the literary representation of black woman's experience has meant understanding her humanity and highlighting it by showing the inadequacy of stereotyped views.

The universalist approach engaged in this study has highlighted the many shades of a black woman's experience. The focus has been to show the possibility of more than one response to an experiential situation. The presence of plurality is accepted by the critical perspective which is universalist in its orientation. Race and gender based approaches are by the very nature of their ideological orientation not able to account for the contradiction and multivalence in a black woman's experience.

Ideology emphasising only one strand of experience tends to ignore the presence of more than one kind of response to an experience.

The contrastive visions of *Alice Walker* and *Toni Morrison* have illustrated that it is possible to have more than one kind of response to the black woman's experience even when both writers share the perception that black women have been victims. The analysis of representation of women in their fiction shows that search for selfhood is a consistent feature in a black woman's experience. Both novelists question stereotyped images of black women existing in society. The individual nature of their responses affects the manner in which they render alternative perceptions about black women's experience. Even though both are contemporary black women writers, (a similarity of condition seen by feminists like Barbara Smith as source for similarity in their vision as well), *Alice Walker* and *Toni Morrison* are shown to have responded differently to the black women's experience.

Walker and Morrison are similar in their view that black women have been victims of sexism and racism. Still, the individual nature of their vision influences the kind of meanings which emerge out of their rendering of similar strands of experience. Their novels illustrate the novelists' concern to articulate the nature of a black woman's victimization. Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* delineates a black woman's victimization emphasising that the black male was always and actually the oppressor. In contrast, *Toni Morrison's* novel

*The Bluest Eye* shows the possibility of victimization in the experience of black males too. Cholly who rapes his daughter Pecola is not seen by Morrison as an inveterate culprit. The novelist recreates emotional nuances within the experience of a black male as well which finally highlights the complex nature of woman's experience of victimization.

The black women's victimization is finally traceable in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* to a series of racist acts committed on black males. In Walker's novel a change in approach of black males is essential for a long lasting resolution of black woman's plight as victims of sexism. Walker indicates that black men need to attack racism, and not black women. Morrison, in contrast, does not see one to one connections in an experience. Her novel draws out the individuality of Pecola's experience. Therefore, the emphasis is to delineate the complex nature of an experience which is defined generally within dehumanising categories. *The Bluest Eye* reveals that Pecola's violation is not an isolated happening. Cholly too had been violated, emotionally if not physically. To have indicated a perception which does not trace black woman's victimization to racism or sexist acts alone is the point which distinguish Morrison's vision from Walker's. Morrison's focus is on drawing out the individuality of each one's experience - male as well as female - which renders any generalisation about either finally meaningless. The depiction of victimization of Cholly and Pecola is able to highlight the actual inadequacy of labels of victimiser or victim. Cholly, the conventionally regarded

victimiser is shown to be also a victim in another experiential situation. Morrison's novel, unlike Walker's, is able to bring out the actual shaping influence of other elements in an experience which are not easily fixed within categories of race or gender.

Morrison's novel *Sula* highlights her concern not to 'bow out' with 'easy answers' to 'complex questions'. The question is not so complex if understood from a race or gender based perspective. From a universalist perspective it is possible to recognise the magnitude of complexity in an experience and to appreciate Morrison's treatment of the experience of being an outcast.

The experience of being an outcast is an explicitly marked reality for a black woman. Morrison's novel focuses on the experience of an outcast not only in terms of the black person who is placed outside the white community. It is more in terms of an inner sense of alienation and rejection which is manifested outwardly in the form of rebellion and non-conformity. Walker's novel *The Color Purple* shows that the presence of a female outcast figure can actually create, in another female, the urge to question her own conformity to the social circle. Morrison and Walker are concerned in these two novels to alter the existing perceptions about the experience of a black woman as an outcast.

Emerging out of the concrete situation of an Afro-American's marginality in white society, Morrison's novel shows the possibility that a black may also be regarded as an outsider even

within the black community. In contrast, Walker shows the necessity of a female outcast figure conventionally regarded as an undesirable presence. Unlike Morrison who is of the view that alienation is a state of mind, Walker's novel sees alienation more in terms of an explicit form of resistance and therefore reposed in a physical presence. The novel *The Color Purple* shows the focus of Walker to be on making the figure of the outcast (Shug) a crucial motivating physical presence for Celie who is actually victimised inside the society. The outcast is also shown in the novel to initiate changes in the self perception of the black male (Mr. \_\_\_\_). Celie's experience of victimization begun by her stepfather is further perpetrated by the oppressive acts of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. The reformation of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is therefore intended to show that the black male is an inveterate victimiser who stands in the way of a black woman's attainment of self realisation. The significance of the female outcast figure therefore, lies in the need of black women to reject the dictates of the patriarchal social structure. Walker is of the view that the black female must consciously break through the citadels of society and revel actually in her condition of being an outcast. Walker affirms that it is only in being an outcast a black woman can counter not only racism but also sexism.

On the other hand, Morrison's novel *Sula* shows that the tendency to label and fix an individual within slots is found in black females too. It is the women in the black community who label Sula as a 'whore' and Nel is labelled as the woman who in contrast is totally pure and innocent. Sula is labelled as a

'whore' because what is seen as wrong by society is more easily discernible in her actions. Unlike Sula's, the actions of Nel are for all intents and purpose innocent and devoid of any evil intention. Yet, as is seen in the novel, Morrison shows the presence of the will to do wrong even in the innocuously pure female insider. According to Morrison, it is the will to do wrong, which is as incriminating as, or even more so than, actually committing a wrong. Seeing the experience of an outcast within terms that resist easy affirmation of defiance, Morrison's novel shows the complex nature of a black woman's experience. The experience of an outcast in the novel *Sula* is rendered in terms which show finally the inadequacy of any label, whether outcast or insider.

Morrison differs from Walker's perception of experience in that she does not see the outcast as indispensable in a society to point out its hypocrisy. Morrison's perception of the experience of an outcast suggests that it is difficult to demarcate at which point an individual is innocent or is culpable. The nature of experience is so complex that what may seem innocence from one point of view could become culpability from another. This is on account of Morrison's perception which does not see any intrinsic difference between a black woman and others. Each one - woman or man, black or white - has to be responsible for one's actions.

Morrison focuses on the element of individual responsibility in an experience to convey the inadequacy of seeing individual responses as solely determined by race, gender or colour.

Morrison shows that society assigns label of outcast to individuals who do not conform to the accepted norm of responsibility. What is crucial to Morrison's view is that it is actually self deception which motivates people to label others as guilty and hence outcasts. Morrison shows in *Sula* that the seemingly wronged wife, Nel, is actually not so innocent. It is Nel's erroneous belief in innocence of her self which is her undoing.

The possibility of falsity in self perception therefore is emphasised by Morrison and as *Sula* shows this state of being is not limited only to black men or whites. *Sula* is an evidence of how Morrison employs narrative technique which brings out her view that black women who are conventionally seen as victims can also be victimisers. The novel shows that women too can be labellers, capable of marginalising other women. The absence of a mature, integrated self perception is seen by Morrison as responsible for the urge to label others. Morrison shows in *Sula* that even women, impelled by self duplicity, can indulge in dehumanising other women through demeaning labels.

In Walker's novels, on the other hand, the possible humanising of black women's image is realised through a rhetoric of victim/oppressor. Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* shows Fanny struggling for self realisation because she is confused by the social expectations of her as a wife. Her inner plight is conceived in terms of the oppression innate in social institutions like marriage. Walker affirms that black women, like Fanny, need to reject the perceptions of society and



redefine their own views and values without injunctions from males or whites. It is the presence of power groups like these which in Walker's opinion impose stereotyped perceptions about black women and in the process rule out her humanity.

In contrast, Morrison's novel *Jazz* focuses on the individual nature of responses that cannot be explained primarily in terms of elements of race, gender or colour. *Jazz* is also like Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* a delineation of an experiential crisis within matrimony. However, unlike Walker, Morrison sees the possibility of more than one perception on the crisis. In a crisis created by an extra-marital affair Morrison does not see resolution in terms of seeing the wife as innocent and the husband as the one who is errant and guilty. Morrison, therefore, is intent on redefining through a particular experiential crisis ideas about the entire spectrum of experience. In fact, through revising views on the eternal triangle of the errant husband, the other woman and the wronged wife, Morrison is actually redefining existing perceptions not only of marriage but the complexity inlaid in the entire human condition as well. By showing the presence of self-delusion in each individual - whether the husband or the wife - Morrison shows that falsity in self perception can bode ill for any relationship. Morrison confirms that falsity is a possibility for wives as well as for husbands. In fact, by the uniqueness of their responses Morrison shows that self duplicity is not an attitude found only in black males or whites. It is seen in black women as well.

On the other hand, Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar* tries to show that self-duplicity is what the black males and whites are specifically prone to. Walker's basic concern for showing black women as victims influences her perception of the nature of self-duplicity within the state of matrimony as well. Therefore, Walker provides a female ancestral figure, Ms. Lissie, whose presence is instrumental and consequently essential for shaping an alternative perception in black males towards matrimony. The black male, Suwelo here, is shown to gradually acquire insight into his own duplicity through the agency of Ms. Lissie. Suwelo is shown to finally see his own active role in making marriage an oppressive living condition for his wife, Fanny. Walker in the novel shows women as victims within marriage while males are the oppressors because they have false perceptions about themselves.

This sense of self-delusion which aggravates a crisis is not stated by Morrison as an attribute only of black males. Instead, Morrison shows in *Jazz* that a deluded perception of self, as completely innocent, can be present in women too. Earlier perceptions saw in the experience of a black woman only exploitation but as Morrison has shown it is possible for the victim also to be an exploiter. Morrison reverses existing notions about marriage by reversing prevailing views about the nature of black woman's experience. In seeing their response as also capable of oppressing a black male Morrison is able to convey a realistic perception of the experience.

The experience of motherhood, like the institution of

marriage, has been perceived by feminists as an oppressive situation for women. Writers have offered individual perceptions on what they perceive as crucial in the experience. Walker's concern in *Meridian* is to redefine the notion of who is a mother in a real sense. Similarly, Morrison too is exploring and questioning the myths of motherhood in *Beloved*. It is interesting to note that both the writers have been focusing on demolition of perceptions which do not accept complexity as an intrinsic element of Afro-American women's experience.

Walker and Morrison in their novels show that it is not always correct to see the one who is different in her choices as one who is wrong, as one who is an outcast. *Meridian* and *Sethe* are shown to live and struggle by the choices they make for themselves. Walker's aim is to show that the notion of motherhood existing in society is oppressive because it does not give women the chance to choose for themselves. Walker shows therefore that those who are forced into an experience and live by the labels assigned by the society could actually be the ones causing damage to those they are supposed to nurture, as in the case of *Meridian's* mother in *Meridian*. Morrison, like Walker, emphasises that mothers who are different are not necessarily wrong. They could, like *Sethe*, be the ones actually loving their children more than they can express. Nevertheless, Morrison, unlike Walker is more concerned to show that the redefinition of what is 'true motherhood' involves acceptance of the fact that it is individuals who make the choices and are therefore responsible for them. Walker, in contrast, builds up the

experience actually in a way which indicates that women need to question the necessity of motherhood primarily because of its inherent oppressive nature.

In Morrison's novel it is not motherhood which is questioned but more crucially the inquiry is into the nature of individual responses. These responses are multiple and can not be understood within generalized formulations. What is of interest here is that though both writers are concerned to question the notion of motherhood as an ideal, blissful state, it is Morrison who convincingly brings out the complexity inlaid in it. This is possible because Morrison, unlike Walker, does not question the nature of black woman's experience with the view to highlighting her status as a victim and the need or possibility for the change in the status only after rejecting it. Morrison too records the process of change in Sethe in response to her situation but the change is more in terms of realizing the complex consequences of her own choices which make her condition not easily definable within the rhetoric of oppression. Walker, on the other hand, shows Meridian's quest for selfhood highlighting the necessity for rejection of the inadequacy of the existing attitudes towards the experience of motherhood. The inadequacy exists, according to Walker, because the imposition of social norms on the experience deprive it of its individual significance. This imposition creates the basis for responses out of the normal on the experience. Walker sees imposed images of motherhood as expression of the actual domination on black women. Therefore, Meridian's unconventional responses to the experience of

motherhood are drawn by Walker as symbolic vociferations of resistance.

The study has shown that Walker and Morrison's contrastive visions shape their portrayal of black women in fictional works. Both writers are trying through their works to alter perceptions about an experience generally cast within stereotyped images. Yet, it is of interest to see that Walker portrays women as innately innocent, liable to be victimised and therefore urgently requiring alteration of social perceptions about them. In emphasising that black women are innately innocent Walker actually holds up her view that "black women are the most fascinating creations in the world". Seeing them as 'fascinating', Walker shows in her portrayal black women as ones who are basically victims but who can change their situation. Walker's stress on seeing the importance of change in black males' attitude is an indication of her recognition that black males too can change. Walker sees them possessing the potential to change, for becoming more mature, for broadening perspective on women. Seeing them as capable of change conveys Walker's aim to show them as complex beings, capable of growth and change, and not totally static. Nevertheless, the change is towards a view of black women that elevates their status as innocent ones.

Such clear cut demarcation of innocent and guilty is absent in Morrison's portrayal of black women in her novels. The comparative aspects highlight the nature of difference in perceptions. An experience which has been very conveniently drawn within a rhetoric of victim and oppressor is perceived

differently by Morrison. Experiential situations which have been more often defined in monolithic terms are questioned by both writers. The difference in their individual perceptions is nonetheless evident. Walker does question the existing stereotypes but her portrayal of women actually replaces one stereotype with another. Walker's view of black women as invariably the innocent victims creates perhaps another stereotyped image about them. Morrison is of the view that the black women as a victim is also capable of being an oppressor in another experiential situation. Her novels, are therefore, able to grasp more sharply and convincingly the ambivalence within the experience. Morrison's portrayal of the experience highlights the complexity innate to it, but which has more often been simplified in static terms like good or bad, innocent or sinner, minor or major, and even alien or insider. Morrison's novels are therefore an exposition of the many hues of the woman's experience which are inadequately explained through categories of a monolithic nature.

This is the reason that quests for self realisation are realistic and enriching in Morrison's novels *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* as compared to Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar*. The quests are journeys for integrating the past with the present. Morrison's novels do not show 'past' as pure, innocent periods which would change for the better the present which is corrupted. This is actually the focus and the manner of depiction of quest in Walker's novel *The Temple of My Familiar*. The possibility of individual choices which make for a complex

perception of experience in the past are not so clearly indicated in Walker's novel but developed to the full in *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*. The questor has to recognise that acceptance of multiple responses in one self leads to the final recognition of multivalence in responses to categories of past or present. A quest is therefore a conscious effort to reshape one's experience, give it some meaning by understanding the nature of one's experience.

The comparative analysis has shown the experiential points at which Walker and Morrison differ. Their individual visions show that they differ in their response to what is significant in the experience of a questor.

The study by showing the points of contrast and similarity between Alice Walker and Toni Morrison and between them and their predecessors suggests a more concrete basis for marking the points of continuity within the Afro-American women's literary tradition. The study has shown that close reading of significant experiential patterns and strategies to represent those strands of experience from a universalist perspective highlights the diverse responses to a black woman's experience. The universalist perception accentuates the humanity of black woman's experience. By focusing on the ambivalence within it the study has shown the inadequacy of critical views that define the experience in relation to a fixed perception of elements of race, gender, colour and class that go into making the experience.

The study has shown that *Alice Walker* and *Toni Morrison*

though similar in their concern to delineate the black woman's experience differ in their approach and final aim as writers. In comparison with Alice Walker, Morrison's novels express the ambivalence within Afro-American experience in terms that are more convincing even to readers far removed from the Afro-American socio-cultural milieu.